



The role of effective communication in successful strategy implementation



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Orientation: In order for strategies to be implemented well, every aspect of the strategy needs to be communicated effectively throughout the entire workforce of the organisation.

Research purpose: The main aim of this research is to investigate the role of effective communication in successful organisational strategy implementation in the services industry in Malawi.

Motivation of the study: There is an evident need to show the impact that effective communication has on successful implementation of strategies. The research was carried out in two organisations which operate in the services industry in Lilongwe in Malawi. The organisations provide financial and consulting services to their targeted customers.

Research design, approach and method: A quantitative research method was used. Data was obtained using an online questionnaire from a bank with 200 employees and a financial services corporate with 28 employees. A total of 160 employees were targeted across the two organisations, 132 from the bank and 28 from the corporate. A combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods were also utilized. A combined total of 133 responses were received from employees from both organisations. Exploratory factor analysis, descriptive statistics, reliability statistics and inferential statistics (multiple regression) were used for the analysis of data.

Main findings: The results of the study revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between three independent factors (credibility of communication, speed of feedback in communication and flexibility of formal communication) and the dependent factor (strategy implementation), with credibility of communication as the most significant factor.

Practical/managerial implications: The study recommends that all organisations, regardless of size, should prioritise the use of formal communication when conveying useful information pertaining to strategy.

Contribution/value add: Several recommendations were made to assist managers and executives to improve aspects of their internal communication based on the identified factors to ensure that strategies are effectively implemented in their organisations.

Keywords: formal communication; informal communication; strategy; strategy implementation; strategic management.

Introduction

It is imperative for every organisation, whether large or small, to have an overall vision, mission and goals which they are striving towards. The vision, mission and goals are the very reason the organisation exists. The most effective method of achieving the set goals and vision is implementing strategies successfully. Nwanzu and Babalola (2019) defined a strategy as a road map that identifies the activities that serve as a game plan for the business. Furthermore, strategies are developed to guide how organisations conduct their business and outline how they will achieve their end goal in greater detail (Surbhi 2018). Organisations strive to have employees who are dedicated to their goals and strategies. Lewis (2018) indicated that for organisation's strategies to be executed well, employees should be aware of strategies and their specific roles with each strategy. Therefore, strategies need to be communicated in a way which is effective, concise and understandable for all the staff in the entire organisation.

Effective communication is very important for organisational success (Liaw et al. 2018). Priya (2018) defined communication as the exchange of ideas, information, thoughts and knowledge using words, gestures or symbols among people. According to Liaw et al. (2018), an effective communication system should be established at all levels of the organisation in order to be successful. It is important that those who communicate are exchanging ideas, feelings and

information which could help the organisation implement its strategies. If strategies and activities required to implement those strategies are not properly communicated, it may lead to operational disorder, inefficiencies and ultimately poor business performance (Lewis 2018). With the recent embrace of technology such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing or the Internet of Things and the rapidly changing ways of communicating, organisations in the current age need to understand and adapt the different effects of utilising communication. It is from this foundation that this study is aimed at investigating the role of effective communication in successful strategy implementation in service industry organisations in Malawi in Lilongwe. This research is significant to the sphere of strategic management and organisational communication literature, as it extends the knowledge base that currently exists in the field. The main drive behind it is to inform academia, organisations and other persons of interest about how important effective communication is in large and small organisations in this day and age in Malawi, given that there is very little research surrounding this geographical area. The study sought to develop a hypothetical model that outlines the important aspects of effective communication and the possible links it has to strategy implementation.

Literature review

Defining strategy

Organisational strategy refers to the actions and approaches created by management intended to ensure the success of the organisation (Schweiger et al. 2019). In addition, Nwanzu and Babalola (2019) agreed that strategy is management's road map for the organisation. They further state that management develops strategies to guide how an organisation conducts its business and outlines the precise way in which it will achieve its overall goals and objectives. Good management is shown by the formulation of a clear and concise strategy, effective communication of strategy and successful strategy implementation.

Strategy implementation

Many organisations prioritise strategy creation and implementation by dedicating significant amounts of financial and physical resources, personnel and time to formulate their goals and strategies. Gartenstein (2018) and Wells (2000:6) agreed by stating that strategy formulation and implementation is important because it ensures that organisational goals are set while allocating the necessary time, resources and personnel towards achieving the objectives. Research by Kabeyi (2019) has estimated that 70% – 90% of organisations fail to realise the success of implementing their strategies; only 63% of financial objectives envisioned by companies' strategies are achieved, and strategies most often fail because of ineffective execution. Kabeyi (2019) explained that the challenges that prevent implementation can be grouped into internal factors within the organisation and external factors that are beyond the control of the organisation. Kabeyi (2019) emphasised that the volatile global economic situation, limited resources and political

interference are the most notable challenges which affect organisations. There are multiple internal factors that affect strategy implementation. One of the internal limiting factors is the organisation's lack of resources (Clark 2017). Strategy implementation requires a range of resources such as funds, infrastructure, staff and time. Dalum (2018) and Clark (2017) stated that another internal factor that affects the implementation of strategies is the lack of follow-up and support. It is a common occurrence for firms to develop strategies but experience low execution levels post strategy planning. Left to themselves, people seldom stick to their long to-do lists and do not implement them because of procrastination (Tawse, Patrick & Vera 2018). It has also been observed that one of the major internal factors that hinders strategy implementation is the resistance to organisational change (Rooke et al. 2010). New strategies often require new ways of doing things, new processes and new ways of thinking. These changes can be met with resistance if they are not introduced well throughout the organisation. Poor communication is one of the critical barriers to implementation of strategies (Ramokgadi, Moreme & Boikanyo 2019).

There are several ways, of ensuring implementation. Kabeyi (2019) believed that ensuring alignment between the new strategy and existing organisational culture and structure is an effective way of enhancing the implementation of strategies. Establishing the alignment will also ensure that the implementation process runs smoother, without any major issues. Effectively managing the organisation's resources through prioritising is another method of overcoming the implementation challenges. Managers should aim to allocate and distribute resources based on the potential value to be derived from the area to which they are allocated. Hrebiniak (2008) stated that organisations should concentrate on strategies which will 'milk the cash cow' first and then allow the success to filter through to the other areas of the organisation. The importance of managing change well is clearly important for effective strategy implementation. Managers can help manage change by having a logical overview of the strategy map that clearly shows the value of the proposed change to the entire organisation (Hrebiniak 2008; Riemersma 2017). In order for strategies to be implemented well in an organisation, every aspect of the strategy needs to be communicated effectively throughout the entire workforce of the organisation (Andersson & Jansson 2020; Dalum 2018). The empirical results of the study by Engert and Baumgartner (2016) revealed that internal communication processes play an important role in managing change. Effective communication at all levels of the organisation helps in transferring the correct and useful information relating to the strategies which have been created. In order for communication to be effective, Lunenburg and Ornstein (2008) advised that the organisation should be structured in a way that allows information to be communicated in three specific ways: horizontally, upwards and downwards. Clear understanding of strategy implementation activities breeds affective commitment and dedication. This ultimately results in improved business performance and implementation of organisational strategies (Shonubi & Akintaro 2016; Taylor 2015).

As observed from the given paragraph, one of the solutions to ensure strategy implementation is to have effective communication. Therefore, the following sections will focus on communication and highlight the different attributes of communication, which are vital for strategy implementation.

Communication

Dunn and Goodnight (2016:14) defined communication as 'the process of conveying information from one person known as the sender to another person known as the receiver'. Communication is seen as a crucial component in the organisation, as it is the tool that is used to unify all employees and ensure that everyone is doing the work required to execute and achieve the overarching goals, strategies and objectives of the organisation (Liaw et al. 2018:1).

Types of communication

Organisations use various communication types to send suitable and detailed messages to employees (Raina & Roebuck 2016). According to Wambui, Kibui and Gathuthi (2012:2), there are two main types of communication; these include verbal communication and nonverbal communication. According to Olds College OER Development Team (2015), verbal communication includes speaking, listening and writing. The sender utilises words and letters to code the information and speaks the message verbally to the receiver; the receiver then decodes the words for understanding and meaning. This type of communication forms an important part of the professional world as it is used to create work relationships, increase productivity and ensure organisational success. Presentations, discussions, meetings, formal and informal conversations are some of the examples where verbal communication is used (Paramitha 2018). Despite the importance of verbal communication, the nonverbal aspect of communication has been deemed as more important (Friedman 2019). Research has shown that '55% of in-person communication comes from nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, body stance and smell' (Olds College OER Development Team 2015). The nonverbal channel, encompasses any method of communication that could transfer a message that is not contained in words themselves. Friedman (2019) stated that body language, gestures, appearance (dressing, jewellery), facial expressions, sounds, smells are all examples of nonverbal cues which can convey a message to other people.

Effective communication

There is ample evidence that highlights the importance of effective communication in successful organisations (Ramokgadi et al. 2019). One of the ways for organisations to ensure that communication is effective is to prioritise management-level communication. Zambas (2019) stated that organisations that have managers who adopt effective communication strategies are able to improve overall productivity. They achieve this by giving clear instructions and fostering good employee relationships, which promote teamwork so that all employees

work towards a similar goal. Hussein et al. (2014) concluded that managers who apply effective communication strategies reported higher employee satisfaction, engagement and less instances of employees lodging complaints. In addition, effective internal communication within an organisation enables strong bonds to be formed between personnel at all levels of the organisation, which results in improved collaboration and coordination across all the departments. It has also been observed that managers who resolve conflict utilising effective communication and dialogue have a higher chance of successfully guiding the organisation through significant organisational change (Braun et al. 2013). Organisations need to be able to sift through sheer volume of data and only communicate the information and data, which are useful for organisational operations. It has been found that being able to successfully select, disseminate and utilise relevant data and information has a substantial positive influence on the organisation's strategy development and implementation processes (Drnevich & Croson 2013). In addition, with the rapid increase of globalisation and multinational companies operating in different countries, organisations now have an increased need to ensure that the communication strategies are effective and overcome any language barriers. It is imperative for the organisation's headquarters to keep all the other divisions and branches abreast with all the necessary policies, activities, developments and strategy changes. The overall information on the growth of the organisation, the future prospects of the organisation, new opportunities and potential threats all need to be communicated between the divisions and branches by an uninterrupted flow of effective internal communication (Communication Theory 2010).

Factors affecting the effectiveness of communication

Speed of communication

The speed with which information travels from the source to the intended target is an important factor to consider. With the improvement of technology, there are now ways for information to go out to the entire organisation simultaneously via both the informal and formal communication channels such as e-mails and instant messaging platforms (Calin 2019; Cascio & Montealegre 2016). Hauer, Harte and Kacemi (2018) found that real-time information can be utilised much faster within the organisation. In addition, using real-time information makes employees perform their jobs easier and can implement strategies more efficiently. Despite some similarities in the speed of both the channels of communication, there are also some differences that are present. Hauer et al. (2018) observed that some forms of formal communication take too much time to prepare and process. For official organisation news to come out, it needs to be vetted and edited by many people before it is released. On the other hand, the informal channel does not require such long preparation times. Surbhi (2018) and Gulam (2010) had also highlighted that information travels faster using the informal channel because the informal channel structure is flexible and allows information to move freely in all directions of the organisation, which is in contrast with the structure of the formal channel.

Research by Hieu and Nwachukwu (2019) recommended that managers need to obtain precise, prompt and unbiased information to be able to make a meaningful evaluation of their firm strategy. The variations in the rate at which information travels in the organisation is a factor that can influence the effect that communication has when implementing strategy in the organisation.

Credibility of communication

The credibility of information that is communicated throughout the organisation is another factor, which needs to be considered. Gomez and Dailey (2017) stated that trust, credibility, openness and candour are vital properties of an ideal communication climate in organisations. For employers to act towards and successfully implement strategies, they need to believe the information which they receive. Research by Tenhiälä and Salvador (2018) found that there are differences in the levels of credibility between the formal channel and the informal channel of communication. They found that formal communication channels are more specific, transparent and less ambiguous than informal communication channels. These findings were more present in organisations in the aviation or military industry, which are adamant in utilising the formal channels in day-to-day operations and strategy implementation. In contrast, informal communication is more prone to spreading information with errors, ambiguity and deviations from the true message which was intended by the organisation (Gomez & Dailey 2017; Surbhi 2018). Tenhiälä and Salvador (2018) believed that these are all important factors which organisations need to consider as they can affect the way in which strategies can be implemented and overall performance of the organisation.

Flexibility of communication

The flow of information between the various levels and departments of the organisation is also an important factor to consider. The information flow largely depends on the communication structure which has been set up by the organisation and the channels in which the information flows (Calin 2019). Calin (2019) believed that different communication structures and channels impact the organisation's communication linkages and access to information; these in turn affect employees' participation, satisfaction and ultimately performance. Gomez and Dailey (2017) stated that some forms of communication are viewed as rigid in nature, highlighting examples such as handbooks, policy manuals and reports as documents which cannot be altered once they have been released. Other forms of communication, on the other hand, are regarded as flexible in that they can easily be altered and modified to fit the need and take advantage of the constant changes in the business environment (Rajshri 2011:52; Winter 2018). In addition, Xu and Li (2013) stated that the flexibility of the informal communication enables messages to convey employee's thoughts, attitudes and motivations. The aforementioned communication flexibility differences display the potential differences in the overall effect which can be present pertaining to strategy implementation.

Provision of feedback in communication

Provision for feedback is the fourth factor that has been found to have an impact on communication. Surbhi (2018) posited that organisations that have an open-door policy for employees to ask questions and provide some feedback can help them to perform the right tasks and ensure that the strategies of the organisations are implemented accordingly. In addition, feedback is important to employees of an organisation because it enables them to fully participate, engage with and experience the information which is being conveyed in the message. This helps to reinforce the messages and lead to better action (Tyagi & Kumar 2004). Lunenburg (2010) pointed out that the informal communication provides a clear path of feedback because it is used freely and makes employees feel comfortable enough to express their feelings and their attitudes regarding various aspects of the organisation. It can also be concluded that it is also relatively easy to provide feedback in formal communication because organisational channels of communications are outlined and there is a record of the communication.

Channels of communication

The last variable is the channel of communication, namely the formal and informal channels. Gulam (2010) indicated that the formal communication channel involves official messages and news that flow through recognised channels or routes officially laid by the organisation. Such communication is well planned and intentional and occurs across all levels of the organisation, such as between entry-level employees and their supervisor, among employees at same level or between the top management and departmental managers (Gulam 2010). Gomez and Dailey (2017) pointed out that the types of formal communication that are widely utilised in organisations include the following: official memos or notices, e-mails, conferences, structured meetings, employee handbooks and company magazines. According to Turkalj and Fosic (2009), the main disadvantage with organisations that rely heavily on formal communication is of information overload. Too much information that is given in short spaces of time can become a burden to employees and lead to inefficiencies. In contrast, Kaplana (2014) found that formal communication has the following notable advantages to organisations: it is effective and dependable, it provides accurate information majority of the time and it has documentary evidence which can be used for future reference. Informal communication, on the other hand, considers the socio-characteristics of the employee as an individual in the organisation. It is largely unofficial and outside the officially designed channels. In addition, this form of communication reflects the employees' perception of the organisation and is useful in gaining the information that leads to the success of the organisation (Turkalj & Fosic 2009). Kaplana (2014) has identified the following characteristics of informal communication: it is not within the control of organisations' management, and it is considered more flexible and reliable than the conventional official communication coming from top management. One common example of informal communication is the grapevine. Kaplana (2014) explained that the grapevine occurs naturally and serves as a

means of emotional release for staff members, providing the administrator with significant information concerning the attitudes and feelings of staff members. According to Lim et al. (2018), social media is often seen as informal mode of communication. With the rise of social media, mobile phones and high Internet usage, more employees and staff are utilising this form of medium for communication. Gulam (2010) explained that the advantages of utilising informal communication include the following: It is flexible and faster, it enables feedback to be given quickly and it helps in achieving better human relations. The aforementioned advantages and disadvantages between the two channels display the potential differences in the overall effect which the two channels can have on the overall communication regarding strategy implementation.

Problem statement

The service industry has been growing in Malawi, as evidenced by the industry's gross domestic product (GDP) contribution increasing from 46.9% in 2009 to 54.3% in 2019 (Statista 2020). This growth is partly attributed to the flourishing financial sector, as the country is scaling up financial inclusion initiatives (Statista 2020). There are many organisations in the Malawian services sector, ranging from large organisations which have many employees and branches to smaller ones which have few employees and in only one location. Operationally, all these organisations have to formulate strategies and ensure that all departments and personnel are working in tandem to implement these strategies. The strategies also need to be effectively communicated throughout the organisation so that they are implemented accordingly. As established in the literature review, successful strategy implementation requires all levels of the organisation to communicate effectively, as most problems result from faulty or ineffective communication (Ramokgadi et al. 2019). Such problems include communication breakdown between employees, poor strategy implementation and poor business performance (Lewis 2018; Speculand 2009). Most of the organisations within the service industry use various methods of communication to disseminate the strategies across the entire organisation, taking advantage of the innovative methods of communication which have become possible with the rapid improvements in information and communication technology (ICT) (Cascio & Montealegre 2016). Based on the different factors that affect the effectiveness of communication which have been highlighted in the literature review, the overall impact of effective communication when implementing various strategies in the organisation is clear. It has been found that there is a lack of information of how these modern organisations in the Malawian services industry utilise effective communication in the work place to successfully implement strategies. Furthermore, there is no conclusive research existing to determine the impact that effective communication has when implementing the strategies set by the organisation's executives and management in large and small organisations.

Therefore, there is a need to conduct such a research within Malawian organisations in the services industry, to ascertain the role of effective communication in successfully implementing the strategies which are created by their management.

Research objectives

The research objectives are split into primary and secondary objectives.

Primary objective

The main aim of this research is to examine the role of effective communication in successfully implementing organisational strategies in organisations that operate in the service industry in Malawi.

Secondary objectives

To help achieve the primary research aim, the following secondary objectives have been formulated:

1. to assess the preferences of employees in organisations on the role of effective communication in strategic implementation
2. to determine the relationship between communication variables and successful strategy implementation
3. to determine the impact of speed of communication, credibility of communication, flexibility of communication, provision of feedback in communication and channel of communication on successful strategy implementation
4. to analyse the differences in the stated communication variables between a large and a small organisation.

Research hypotheses

Objectives 2 and 3 can further be elaborated by the following hypotheses which are also graphically illustrated in Figure 1:

- H1:** There is a significant relationship between the speed of communication and successful strategy implementation.
- H2:** There is a significant relationship between the credibility of communication and successful strategy implementation.

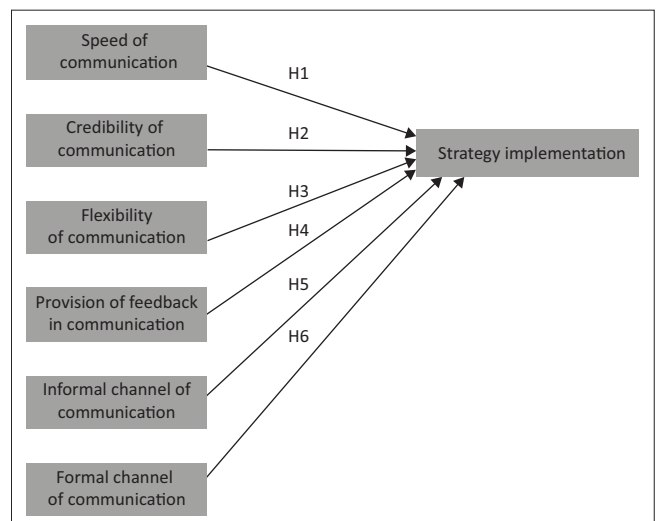


FIGURE 1: Initial hypothesis model.

- H3:** There is a significant relationship between the flexibility of communication and successful strategy implementation.
- H4:** There is a significant relationship between the provision of feedback in communication and successful strategy implementation.
- H5:** There is a significant relationship between the informal channel of communication and successful strategy implementation.
- H6:** There is a significant relationship between the formal channel of communication and successful strategy implementation.

Research method

A quantitative method was utilised for this research. According to Rahi (2017) the quantitative research methodology is purely based on numbers and mathematical measurements of characteristics displayed by individuals and events. Kumar (2011:168) wrote that the positivistic research paradigm allows the researcher to explore, quantify, determine, intensify and combine attitudes to different events or objects to arrive at a conclusion about the overall attitude of humans towards the particular events or objects. A positivistic research paradigm was used in order to test the relationships as proposed by the hypotheses.

Study population

This research is a case study of two organisations that operate in the service industry in Lilongwe in Malawi, the researcher has two target populations. The first target population was the 200 employees in a large organisation, and the second target population was the 28 employees in the small organisation. Therefore, the entire target population for the study is 228.

This research utilised convenience sampling together with snowball sampling. Out of the employees working for in the organisations, the researcher initially targeted 10 employees from each organisation to administer the questionnaire to. Those 10 employees were identified with the assistance of the human resources (HR) departments. Thereafter, the researcher tasked the employees to identify and send the questionnaire to their colleagues for them to complete the questionnaire as well. The colleagues in turn sent the link to others within the organisation so that it spread and reached as many employees as possible. The total targeted sample from the large organisation was 132 out of 200, and the target sample from the small organisation was 28, bringing the total to 160. These figures were determined using the sampling formula from Blair and Blair (2015), which depicts that to get a confidence level of 95% from such a population, the adequate sample size should be 160.

Data collection

Data for this study were collected through closed-ended questionnaires utilising an electronic survey tool named Google Forms. The questionnaire was distributed online by e-mail to gather empirical evidence from the senior

management, middle management and ground-level employees of the organisation. The questionnaire had a total of eight separate sections (Sections A, B, C, D, E, F, G and H). Sections A and B contained straightforward questions with options the respondent chose from. Sections C through G attempted to operationalise the factors by using a 5-point Likert scale for the questions. According to Monette et al. (2013), a Likert scale, in brief, consists of a series of statements which are followed by several ordered response alternatives. Each of the responses on a scale is assigned values and calculated to yield a single summative amount (Kothari 2004:85). Furthermore, Brown (2011:11) stated that Likert scale items can be analysed by interval measurement, which makes the type of scale useful in obtaining the respondent's opinion on a statement regarding the factors the research has identified.

Section A gathered the biographical data of respondents such as age, years of experience and level of employment status. Section B consisted of statements regarding types of communication which are used within the organisation. Sections C to G measured the dependent factors and Section H measured the dependent factor.

A brief summary of the measures is as follows: to assess speed, five questions were adapted from Hauer et al. (2018) and Surbhi (2018). Five credibility items were also adapted from People Pulse (2008). To assess flexibility, five questions were asked, as adapted from Ambatipudi and Ramakumar (2015). Five items were used to assess feedback adapted from Ambatipudi and Ramakumar (2015) and People Pulse (2008). To assess the informal and formal communication channels, 12 items were adapted from Kaplana (2014) and Gulam (2010).

A pretest of the questionnaire was carried out to ensure that the questions were valid, the wording was understood and quality data were collected. After pretesting and refining the questionnaire, it was then distributed to employees in the organisations.

Data analysis

This study was based on the exploratory factor analysis as researchers aimed to determine the factors which may have a significant relationship based on the proposed hypothesis.

Data analysis was conducted through the use of descriptive statistics. Trochim (2020) explained that descriptive analysis deals with the presentation and organisation of data which has been collected, often in a manner that is simple and easy to understand. Measures such as frequency, mean and median, together with measures of dispersion such as the standard deviation and range are examples of descriptive statistics (Trochim 2020). This study used the following descriptive analysis measures: (1) the frequency with which respondents answered specific questions, (2) the dispersion of the various respondent answers and the standard deviations of the answers. In addition to the descriptive statistics, the study also utilised multiple regression and the

Pearson's product coefficient to determine the correlation between the variables. *T*-tests and analysis of variance were also used to determine the differences between the large and the small organisation. Comprehensive data analysis was undertaken using computer software programs such as IBM SPSS version 24 and Microsoft Excel.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was requested and approved before any form of data collection commenced. Ethical Clearance was approved by University of Johannesburg (ref. no. 20SOM33). The researchers requested the permission and consent of participants. Permission letters were also received from the two organisations. The participants were assured of confidentiality in the information that would be obtained from them and their privacy. They were also assured that all information obtained from the study would be used for the sole purpose of the study and would not be used for any other purpose. The participants' right to privacy was respected and adhered to. All participants were assured of their freedom to withdraw from the study.

Discussion and results

Response rate

Out of the 160 questionnaires, 109 were answered by organisation A and 24 were answered by organisation B, resulting in an overall response rate of 83%. The combined total of 133 completed questionnaires were therefore received, and none of the questionnaires from the organisations had missing values.

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

The results indicated that the average age of all the respondents was 30 years old, and the median age was 28, thereby showing the youthfulness of the workforce in the organisations. This is in accordance with the overall youthful demographic of Malawi, as the median age of population in

2020 is 18.1 according to Worldometer (2020). Organisation A has a lower average age than organisation B, with 29 and 36, respectively. Similarly, organisation A has a lower median age than organisation B of 28 and 35, respectively. The oldest respondent from organisation A was 47 years old, whereas the youngest respondent was 22 years old. Organisation B results showed that the oldest respondent was 62 years old, and the youngest respondent was 23 years old.

Regarding the occupation level in the organisation, most of the respondents (47%) indicated that they were in middle management, closely followed by those in operations (44%); 5% stated that they were in senior management and 4% in the executive role. A comparison between the organisations showed that majority of respondents for organisation A were in operations with 46%, whereas the majority of the respondents for organisation B were in middle management with a total of 50%. It was also observed that 8% of organisation B's respondents were executives, while only 3% of organisation A's responses were executives.

The role of effective communication in strategy implementation

Secondary objective 1 was to assess the preferences of employees in organisations on the role of effective communication in strategy implementation. In order to assess the preferences of employees on the role of communication in strategy implementation, the researcher asked the respondents on the usage patterns of the various forms of communication within the organisation. The results showed that e-mail was the most used method of communication, with 96% of all the respondents indicating that they used e-mail. This was followed by meetings (84%), WhatsApp (76%), online teleconferencing (76%) and official phone calls (75%). Less than half of the respondents indicated that they utilised memos (47%) and the grapevine (44%) as a means of communicating. The least used method of communication was social media, with only 29% of the total respondents indicating that they use it. The results are illustrated in Figure 2.

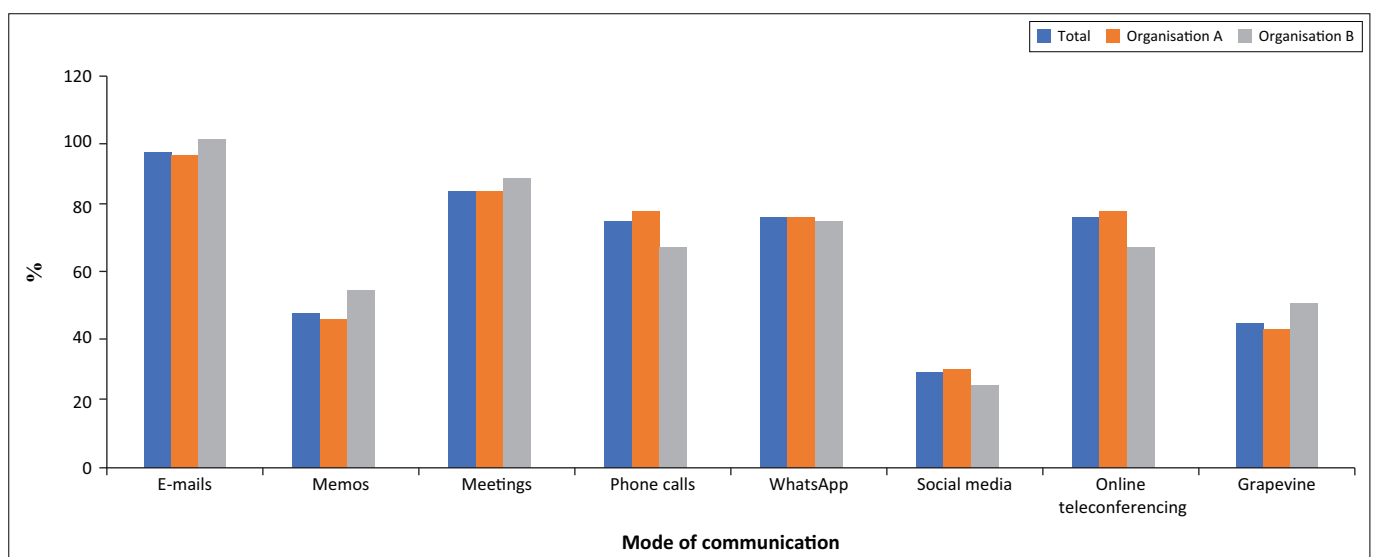


FIGURE 2: Types of communication used.

With regard to usefulness, the results indicated that even though some respondents utilised a particular communication channel, they did not receive information that was deemed important or useful to help them complete their core tasks in the organisation (see Figure 3 for the results). From the data, e-mail (90%) is seen as the mode of communication that provides the most useful information for all the respondents, followed by meetings (79%) and teleconferencing (55%). The least useful communication tool regarding strategy implementation was social media with only 14%, which is not unusual because organisations and employees alike only utilise social media for marketing and promotional information targeting customers rather than information pertaining to strategy.

The largest disparity between usage and usefulness was with WhatsApp as a communication tool, it is used by 76% of respondents, yet only 47% of them stated that it is relevant for strategy implementation purposes. One major conclusion the researcher can draw from this is that the majority of respondents obtain useful information that help them implement their organisation's strategy from formal methods of communication (e-mails, meetings and phone calls) compared to the informal methods (WhatsApp, social media and the grapevine).

The secondary objective 2 was to determine the relationship between the speed of communication, credibility of communication, flexibility of communication, provision of feedback in communication, informal channel of communication, formal channel of communication and successful strategy implementation.

In order to achieve the secondary objective 2, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. This was performed to determine whether all the factors were viable for further analysis. The research utilised Kaiser's criterion, which is also referred to as the eigenvalue rule, to establish the number of factors that described the interrelationship between the variables. Pallant (2007:182) observed that the method is

used to determine which factors are to be retained and removed. Eigenvalues that are greater than 1.0 are acceptable, while values that are below 1.0 are excluded (Pallant 2007:182). Table 1 shows that a total of five factors obtained an eigenvalue of greater than 1; therefore, only five factors proceeded for further analysis.

Cronbach's alpha

All the alpha coefficients are above 0.7, which makes them favourable. The factors are therefore considered as internally consistent and reliable. The variable that has the highest alpha value is *flexibility and formal channels of communication* (0.910), seconded by *strategy implementation* (0.897), *informal channels of communication* is third (0.876). *Speed and provision of feedback in communication and credibility of communication* have the lowest alpha values with 0.876 and 0.837, respectively. All the factors used in research are considered as reliable as they have all attained an alpha coefficient above 0.7.

Speed of feedback in communication

The descriptive statistical analysis of the respondents' answers regarding the questions on *speed of communication* showed an overall mean score of 3.96 and a relatively low standard deviation of 0.98. This meant that the majority of respondents believe that the *speed of communication* is an important factor regarding successful strategy implementation. Similarly, the descriptive statistics regarding *provision of feedback in communication* showed the respondents'

TABLE 1: Eigenvalues.

Factor	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Cumulative eigenvalue	Cumulative (%)
1	10.694	38.193	10.69	38.193
2	4.101	14.645	14.79	52.838
3	1.626	5.807	16.42	58.644
4	1.437	5.132	17.86	63.777
5	1.256	4.486	19.11	68.263

Note: Extraction method: Principal component analysis.

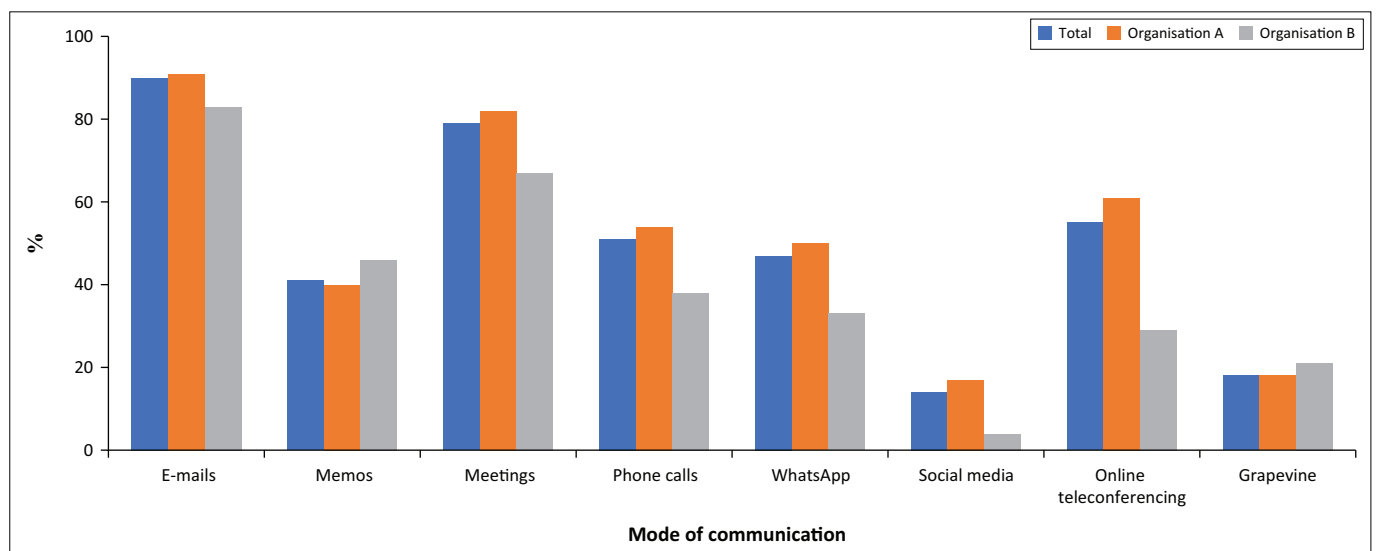


FIGURE 3: Usefulness of communication.

mean score of 3.97 and a standard deviation of 0.94, thereby proving that they believed feedback to be important. However, after running a factor analysis (see Appendix 1), it became apparent that the questions that intended to measure *speed of communication*, loaded together with another factor, namely *provision of feedback in communication*. These two factors or variables were subsequently merged to form a new factor named 'speed of feedback in communication'. The overall mean and standard deviation results for this new factor were 3.87 and 0.76, respectively. This shows that most of the respondents agreed with the notion that strategy implementation is affected by the speed of feedback in the organisation's communication. The correlation analysis that was carried out also showed that there is a significant positive correlation between speed of feedback of communication and strategy implementation. With an R value of 0.649, it shows that the correlation is moderately strong.

Flexibility of formal communication

The descriptive statistical analysis of the respondent's answers regarding the questions on *flexibility of communication* showed an overall mean score of 3.97 and a standard deviation of 1.00. This illustrated that overall, the respondents were in agreement with the statements that suggested that flexibility is an important attribute to have for communication within the organisation. Notably, a higher mean score and standard deviation score of 4.11 and 1.00 were found for the variable *formal channels of communication*. These scores can be interpreted to mean that most of the respondents agree that formal communication is important to their organisation as it helps them to access vital information regarding strategy. However, when the factor analysis (refer to Appendix 1) was completed, the two factors loaded together, which signified that the questions were measuring the same construct. As a result, the two factors were merged to become one factor named 'flexibility of formal communication'. The overall mean and standard deviation results for this new factor were 4.00 and 0.81, respectively. This shows that majority of the respondents agreed with the notion that their ability to implement strategy is affected by the flexibility of the formal channels of communication in their organisation.

A correlation analysis shows that this new factor has an R value of 0.621. This value is regarded as moderately strong, therefore proving that there is a moderately strong correlation between *flexibility of formal channels of communication* and *strategy implementation*. This is somewhat in line with the literature because the literature suggests that one of the disadvantages of formal communication is its rigidity and lack of speed (Calin 2019). The data show that if formal communication becomes more flexible, then employees will be able to get their information easily, which will allow them to perform their tasks associated with the organisation's strategy.

Credibility of communication

The descriptive data analysis shows that most respondents agreed with the statements pertaining to credibility within

their organisations, as evidenced from a mean score of 4.130. This meant that respondents believed that credibility was important to their ability to perform tasks that contributed to the overall strategy of the organisation. A correlation analysis carried out presented an R value of 0.649 and a p -value of 0.000 between *credibility of communication* and *strategy implementation*. This signifies that there is a moderately strong significant correlation between the two variables. These findings are in line with the literature because it proves that when employees receive credible information through the organisation's communication, they are more likely to act accordingly to accomplish the right tasks (Tenhiälä & Salvador 2018). In addition, credibility also helps the employees to pass on relevant information to their fellow colleagues, this in turn ensures that the entire department or subdivision receives the correct information that helps them to accomplish the strategy. The results also prove that the H_2 hypothesis can be accepted as there is a significant relationship between the two variables.

Informal channels of communication

The descriptive analysis of the respondents' answers regarding the questions on *informal channels of communication* showed that an overall mean score of 3.430 and a standard deviation of 1.150. This meant that respondents were somewhat neutral to the notion that the informal channel of communication is an important factor regarding successful strategy implementation within their organisation, with many respondents stating that they do not trust the information which travels through the informal channels as the main reason. A correlation analysis between the informal channel of communication and strategy implementation showed that there is a very weak correlation between the two variables, with an R -value of 0.018. In addition, a p -value of 0.838 further showed that the relationship between the two values was not significant. The empirical results confirm the literature because it shows that the disadvantages of informal channel, especially the lack of control, credibility and inability to trace the source of information make its impact on strategy implementation very minimal and insignificant (Kelvin-Iloafu 2016). As a result, the researcher has rejected hypothesis H_5 .

The secondary objective 3 set out to determine the impact of speed of communication, credibility of communication, flexibility of communication, provision of feedback in communication, informal channel of communication and formal channel of communication on successful strategy implementation. In order to achieve secondary objective 3, multiple regression analyses were conducted between the variables. The results of the multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 2.

The multiple regression analysis revealed a positive linear relationship ($p = 0.004$) between *speed of feedback in communication* and *strategy implementation*. A positive beta value of 0.269 shows that the relationship is positive, therefore suggesting that strategies are implemented more successfully when communication and feedback moves faster

TABLE 2: Multiple regression results.

Dependent variable: Strategy implementation			
Independent variables	Beta	t-value	Significance (p)
Speed and provision of feedback of communication	0.269	2.901	0.004
Credibility of communication	0.302	3.519	0.001
Flexibility and formal channels of communication	0.263	3.016	0.003
Informal channels of communication	-0.060	-0.962	0.338

within the organisation. The results also illustrated a significant positive relationship ($p = 0.001$) between *credibility of communication* and *strategy implementation*. A beta value of 0.302 also showed a positive relationship. This positive relationship implies that more strategies are implemented successfully when the information that is communicated within the organisation is credible. Another significant positive relationship ($p = 0.003$) was reported between the variables *flexibility of formal channels of communication* and *strategy implementation*. The variables also show a positive relationship with a beta value of 0.263. Such a relationship indicates that the strategies are more likely to be successfully implemented when information is communicated through formal channels that are also flexible in nature. This is in agreement with the results from Kelvin-Iloafu (2016).

A negative beta value -0.060 showed that the relationship between *informal communication* and *strategy implementation* is negative. In addition, a p -value of 0.338, which is greater than 0.05, showed that the relationship between the variables is not significant. In other words, using more informal communication only moderately hinders strategies from being successfully implemented in the organisation. This is not in agreement with the study by Stacho et al. (2019), which established that both the formal and informal channels of communication are essential in ensuring that the flow of information in an organisation is effective enough to create an environment suitable to implement organisational strategies and goals.

Secondary objective 4 set out to analyse the differences in the stated communication variables between a large and a small organisation.

The first method that was used was a comparison of the absolute value of the mean scores of the respondents; the overall picture showed that the mean scores on all the five variables were somewhat similar for both the organisations. The largest difference between the means of the two organisations is in the dependent variable of *strategy implementation* (Organisation A = 4.08, Organisation B = 4.52, difference = 0.44). The smallest difference came from *speed of feedback* (Organisation A = 3.85, Organisation B = 3.92, difference = 0.07), showing that the respondents from the two organisations did not have extremely different views regarding those variables.

The second method that was used to analyse the differences was a t -test analysis. Similar to the comparison of means method, the t -test goes beyond and compares the mean values of the two organisations and determines if the

differences are significant or not. The t -test results showed that the only two variables that are significant have a statistically significant difference between the two organisations are *strategy implementation* and *flexibility of formal channels of communication*. The difference between the scores of the remaining variables, *credibility of communication*, *speed of feedback in communication* and *informal channels of communication*, are not statistically significant.

The results show that the perceptions and views of the respondents from the two organisations are not extremely different. Both groups of respondents have similar views when it comes to the importance of certain aspects of communication when implementing strategy, hence, the suggestion that the same communication methods that are to be used to promote strategy implementation in large organisations can be utilised in small organisations to achieve the same results. This is in agreement with the results from Kelvin-Iloafu (2016).

Managerial implication and business implications

Based on the results, the study recommends that all organisations, regardless of size, should prioritise the use of formal communication when conveying useful information pertaining to strategy. Even though the usage of informal communication tool such as WhatsApp and online teleconferencing is increasing because of the advancement of technology, organisations should refrain from fully relying on these forms of communication as they are perceived as not useful by the employees.

It is also recommended that organisations should take practical steps to improve how quickly feedback is provided to all their employees. One of the ways this can be achieved is to make feedback continuous and a part of day-to-day tasks; this enables managers and employees to ensure that they are constantly performing the right tasks that are in line with the overarching strategy and goal.

Furthermore, it is recommended that organisations should strive to make adjustments that allow their formal communication to be more flexible. Embracing ICT and adopting new ways of communicating formally is one of the ways in which organisations can become more flexible. The invention of teleconferencing applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype has made official virtual meetings possible where important information regarding strategy can be shared, thereby moving away from having the need to physically meet and share information face to face.

With regard to credibility, the research strongly recommends that organisations should prioritise enhancing the credibility of the information which it conveys through the communication channels. One of the ways this can be achieved is by conveying information and insights based on thorough research and analysis, as this gives the information more weight. Another way to enhance credibility is to utilise official methods within the organisation to convey the

message: using e-mails, signed letters and documented meetings are good examples of official methods which can be used. Information conveyed through these methods is more credible as it can be traced back to the source and be verified if the need arises.

As a result of the finding that informal channels are not suitable for strategy implementation, this research recommends that managers and executives in the organisation should minimise the use of informal communication, such as WhatsApp and casual word of mouth, within the organisation when conveying information that is crucial to strategy implementation. This may be difficult given the ease and practicality of utilising informal communication channels; however, the study has also pointed out that the use of informal communication has a slightly negative impact on strategy implementation.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The study focused on one large organisation and one small organisation, so the set of factors suggested may be specific to these particular organisations and may not be applicable to other organisations in the Malawian service industry. This study also targeted organisations that are primarily in the financial services industry, and as such the findings may only be relevant to those organisations in the financial services industry in particular. In addition, the lack of an intervening variable can also be regarded as a limitation of the study, as intervening variables often help to explain the relationship between independent variable and the dependent variable in greater detail.

Future research can be carried out using a qualitative methodology to gain more insights into the perceptions that employees have pertaining to communication and strategy implementation. In addition, with a few changes to the context and structure, this study can be replicated in another country or industry to form a comparative study to see if the perceptions are similar.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to examine the influence of the independent factors speed of communication, flexibility of communication, credibility of communication, provision of feedback in communication and channels of communication to the dependent variable strategy implementation in two financial services organisations in Malawi. The results of the study proved that only the independent factors of speed of feedback in communication, flexibility of formal channels of communication and credibility of communication have a significant impact on strategy implementation, with credibility of communication being the factor with the largest impact. The results also confirmed the direct impact of effective communication on successful strategy implementation, thereby confirming that the primary objective of the research was achieved. Figure 4 shows the final research model, which has been confirmed by the research.

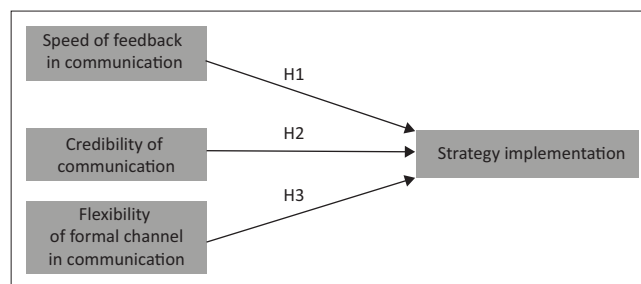


FIGURE 4: Final hypothesis model.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

M.C. drafted the original manuscript as a student. D.H.B. was a supervisor and he also contributed to writing, reviewing and editing of the article.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, D.H.B., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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Appendix 1

TABLE 1-A1: The results of factor analysis based on rotation component matrix.

Rotated component matrix	Factors				
	Flexibility of formal comms	Speed of feedback	Informal comms	Strategy implmnt	Credibility of comms
FC12: I am satisfied with the usage of formal communication in my organisation	0.783	0.313	-0.035	0.276	0.123
FC10: <i>Formal Channels</i> allows for the lines of communication are to be 'open' at all levels of my organisation	0.774	0.308	0.076	0.245	0.002
FC11: I consider the <i>formal channel</i> of communication an important factor that helps me accomplish my targets	0.773	0.179	0.054	0.164	0.157
FC9: <i>Formal channels</i> allows information to be flexible and easy to share to colleagues.	0.742	0.145	0.055	0.218	0.163
FC4: I consider flexibility of communication an important factor that helps me accomplish my targets.	0.635	0.073	0.150	0.103	0.425
FC5: I am satisfied with the flexibility of communication in my organisation.	0.611	0.374	0.073	0.205	0.215
FC2: Communication in my organisation is flexible and easy to share to colleagues.	0.591	0.441	0.114	0.147	0.287
PFC2: Communication in my organisation allows for the lines of communication are to be 'open' at all levels of the organisation.	0.255	0.767	0.060	0.212	0.015
SC5: I am satisfied with the speed of communication in my organisation.	0.206	0.693	-0.139	0.055	0.313
PFC3: Communication in my organisation takes my feedback seriously.	0.242	0.684	0.009	0.318	0.124
PFC1: Communication in my organisation allows me to contribute my thoughts and ideas to my colleagues and superiors.	0.368	0.659	-0.056	0.169	-0.064
SC3: Communication in my organisation provides me with important information about the strategy in real time.	0.156	0.637	0.032	0.279	0.439
SC1: Communication in my organisation is quick enough to help me make decisions on time regarding my job.	0.229	0.578	-0.116	0.209	0.443
IC3: <i>Informal channels</i> allow information to flow freely within my department.	0.006	-0.021	0.864	-0.092	0.047
IC5: I consider the <i>informal channel</i> of communication an important factor that helps me to accomplish my targets.	0.052	-0.200	0.841	0.005	0.060
IC4: <i>Informal channels</i> allow me to contribute my thoughts and ideas to my colleagues and superiors.	0.089	0.001	0.802	0.077	-0.027
IC1: <i>Informal channels</i> provide me with important information about the strategy in real time.	-0.027	0.034	0.788	-0.085	0.242
IC2: <i>Informal channels</i> make me comfortable to pass along information that I receive to my co-workers because it is credible and consistent.	0.027	-0.064	0.774	0.059	-0.113
IC6: I am satisfied with the usage of informal communication in my organisation.	0.130	0.176	0.770	0.004	-0.044
SI3: My department always uses an annual workplan that is in line with the organisation's strategic objectives.	0.326	0.159	-0.034	0.833	0.079
SI5: My organisations strategic plan identifies specific performance indicators for measuring the success of strategies.	0.224	0.140	-0.061	0.823	0.204
SI2: In general, I believe my department is successful in implementing the strategies that were set.	0.132	0.422	0.026	0.725	0.168
SI4: My organisation has a good communication system that is effective for strategy to be implemented.	0.269	0.430	-0.092	0.682	0.271
SI1: I am aware of my organisation's vision, mission, goals and strategies.	0.215	0.161	0.079	0.584	0.250
CC1: Communication in my organisation provides me with accurate information about strategy that I can trust.	0.191	0.229	0.021	0.197	0.778
CC4: I consider the credibility of communication an important factor that helps me to accomplish my targets.	0.247	0.058	0.064	0.248	0.685
CC5: I am satisfied with the credibility of communication in my organisation.	0.217	0.450	-0.014	0.275	0.541
CC2: Communication in my organisation makes me comfortable to share information that I receive with my coworkers because it is credible and consistent.	0.224	0.472	0.106	0.393	0.474
Extraction Method: Principal component analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.†	-	-	-	-	-

†, Rotation converged in seven iterations.