



A Study of Communication Practices at a Higher Educational Institution in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract:

The study examined employees' perceptions of the adequacy of communication practices at a higher educational institution in Saudi Arabia. The study of population consists of 185 female employees engaged in administrative work. Three measures of adequate communication have been used: information availability, information timeliness, and information accuracy. While respondents felt that communication practices were adequate in several aspects, they were critical of two aspects of the organizational structure, gender segregation and centralization of authority, which they considered to have a negative effect on the free and accurate flow of information and organizational communication. This study points to the importance of examining organizational communication practices and presents recommendations to improve these practices in the interest of contributing to Saudi Arabia's overall social and economic development.

Introduction:

In its quest for social and economic progress, Saudi Arabia has emphasized education. The government's two five-year development plans of the 1990s allocated more than \$25 billion each for education, about 18 percent of the national budget (Rugh 2002: 41-42). The funding priority that the Saudi government gives to education compares very favorably with education funding in the rest of the Arab world. The country spends 23 percent of its budget and 7.5 percent of GNP on education at all levels, more proportionately than

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almost any other Arab country devotes to this purpose (Rugh 2002: 42).

By the year 2000, the total number of students enrolled in grades one to 12 in Saudi Arabia had reached almost 4.11 million (Rugh 2002: 42). Public education was opened to women in Saudi Arabia in 1959. Separation of the sexes has been a consistent feature of Saudi education. Currently, the country has seven universities, five of which enroll both men and women. At the universities enrolling both sexes, women study in separate campus facilities, in some cases connected by closed-circuit television (one-way video, two-way audio). When there is no qualified female faculty, a male professor may teach a course using one-way closed-circuit television. In addition to the five co-educational universities, the country has about 26 girl's colleges. Forty percent of all university students in the country are women (Somers and Caram, 1998: 53).

The continuing increase in the number of schools and colleges and the gender-segregated system in Saudi Arabia have created jobs for women in teaching and educational administration. Saudi women's involvement in the labor force is relatively new. Only five percent of the country labor force is female. In higher education, women hold non-supervisory positions and such supervisory ones as director of the girls' section, vice-dean, and director of an academic department.

As higher educational institutions have increased in size and functions in Saudi Arabia, interest has increased in improving administrative structures and practices in such institutions. One area of concern has been communication practices. Studies have criticized communication practices between the male and female sections in higher educational institutions. Communication inadequacies have been found to adversely affect workers' performance (productivity) and organizational effectiveness (Al-Husseiny 1990, Smith 1994, Al-Swadi 1995, Khiat 1995, Filmban 1996, Kumfer 1997).

Purpose of the Study:

This exploratory study focuses on Saudi women office workers at a higher educational institution and their perceptions of the adequacy

of the communication practices within their places of employment. Comparison is made between permanent and contract employees with regard to their perceptions in order to determine whether perceived communication problems were more prevalent among contract employees. They, on average, have worked for a short period of time and may need more information guidelines of communication channels and procedures.

Importance of the Study:

Very limited research has been conducted on organizational communication practices involving employed Saudi women. The data of the present study, while not inferential, provide useful and recent descriptive information which suggest topics that other systematic studies might profitably pursue in the future.

In Saudi Arabia, women are segregated from men outside of their family, including the labor force. Because of this separation, findings of previous research focusing on organizational communication practices in Saudi male workplaces may not accurately describe Saudi female workplaces as well. While the two types of workplace may share commonalities based on social and cultural traditions, the markedly differing gender role expectations of Saudi women and men suggest that female workplaces may have communication practices distinct from those of male workplaces which deserve separate study. This study seeks to shed light on cultural, social and administrative structural factors that influence women's communication practices within their own work context.

The value of studying communication practices derives from organizational theorists' assumptions that "good communication" makes a difference in organizational effectiveness. Thus the understanding of what is "good communication" and its correlates should increase our knowledge of how to make organizations more effective in reaching their goals (Roberts and O'Reilly 1974: 326).

The complexities of human behavior in organizations, including communications, can be better understood when they are rigorously related to other organizational variables. For example, if a strong

relationship is found between poor job performance and workers' perception that the information transmitted at work is often inaccurate, it suggests that organizations should devote more time to correcting problems of accuracy (Roberts and O'Reilly 1974: 326). Determining the relationships of communication variables to objective and behavioral criteria should aid in developing organizational communication models to maximize organizational effectiveness (Roberts and O'Reilly 1974: 326). The present study seeks to identify specific communication factors that may have an adverse or a positive effect on the employee performance.

Literature Review:

According to the functionalist approach, individuals are agents who create their own environments. Organizations are composed of functional interrelationships, coordinated by communication (Miller 1972).

Communication has been the subject of considerable attention in organization research. A review of the organization literature reveals that among the communication facets most frequently discussed and investigated are directionality of information flow (e.g., Graves 1972); accuracy and distortion of information (Read 1962; Wilensky 1967); Lawler, Porter and Tenenbaum 1968); gatekeeping of information (Davis 1968; Rosen and Tesser 1970); and communication purpose, content, importance, and speed (Roberts and O'Reilly 1974).

Additional aspects of communication that have been less discussed in organizational research include overload (Porat and Haas, 1969) and satisfaction with communication (Lawler, Porter, and Tenenbaum, 1968; Lawson, 1965).

Jablin and Sussman (1983) have identified five functions of communication that serve the formal organization: 1) to generate information, 2) to process information, 3) to share information necessary for the coordination of interdependent tasks, 4) to disseminate decisions, and 5) to reinforce a group's perspective/consensus. As Szilagyi and Wallace (1990: 506) summarize it,

communication is the process by which necessary information for decisions is transmitted.

Hall (1987: 196) indicated that the key to an effective organizational communication process is to ensure that the right people get the information (in amount and quality) at the proper time. Information flow, which occurs when everyone knows what is going on in the organization, is one of the key characteristics of an effective organization (Wilsey 1995: 87).

Greenbaum (1974: 741) defines organizational communication as "the sum of a group of subsystems or functional communication networks, each of which is related to one or more organizational goals." Guetzkow (1965:539), in his synthesis of theory and research in organizational communication, explains that as messages are sent and received throughout the organization, message flows become regularized, enabling description of communication networks. Information is usually transmitted through messages. When we study message functions, it is natural to examine what we call message outcomes.

Three areas of potential problems associated with message exchange are dominant in the literature: overload, distortion, and ambiguity (Stohl and Redding, 1987: 475-485). Message overload refers to the transmission of new information at a rate that far exceeds the input-processing and output-generating capabilities of organizational actors. Distortion of information takes place as a result of serial transmission. As messages travel up and down and across the organizational hierarchy, they may get modified or distorted. The distortion takes place as a result of summarization, changing emphasis within a message, and/or withholding of information by some members of the organization. Finally, an ambiguous message can be interpreted in two or more plausible ways.

Communication and Job Performance:

Many studies agree that communication patterns in an organization play an important role in its employees' job performance and thus in determining organizational effectiveness. Discussing the relationship between employee performance and communication, Papa and

Tracy (1988: 525) identified two lines of research. The first concerns the relationship between communication and the diffusion of innovations. The second concerns the relationship between communication behavior and productivity. They cited the previous relevant work of Downs and Hain (1982); Jenkins (1977); Lewis, Cummings, and Long (1982); and Monge, Edwards, and Kirste (1978). Katzell and Thompson (1990:69) are among those who have identified communication as one of the organizational features that affects employees' ability to perform their work.

In Arab countries, studies also show that adequacy of communication affects employees' job performance and thus organizational effectiveness (Elish 1981: 34, Alselmi 1985: 47). Yagi (1983: 158) explained that smoothly functioning communication procedures enable workers to perform better. Al-Shareef (1992: 103) reports that a major factor affecting work performance negatively in large bureaucratic public organizations is snarled communication procedures, particularly known as "red tape."

The Saudi Arabian Cultural Context:

The Saudi social value system is based on three main subsystems: the Islamic religion, the family, and the cultural tradition.

The Saudi family is a male-dominated institution in which the important decisions are still being made by men. Cultural norms, civil rules, and juridical legislation all support men's authority in the family and society (Al-Khateeb, 1998: 167, 168). Women are expected to accept male authority and to comply with the system. The separation of the sexes in Saudi Arabia is maintained and explained within the context of Islam. The separation of the sexes follows a government policy and is strictly applied in public spheres.

The management system seem to reflect in part Saudi Arabian cultural values. In Arabia, managerial behavior remains within the framework of authoritarian and hierarchially structured organizations (Ali, 1993:3). Employees are usually expected to act obediently according to a formal hierarchy of authority. Decision-making is pushed upward in this hierarchy. Cultural values and social settings

tend to encourage the acceptance of authority and subordination to superiors (Ali and Al-Shakis 1985: 145). Islam and Arab tradition recognize a status hierarchy. It may be argued that Saudi managers typically make "decisions autocratically and paternalistically" (Bjerke and Al-Meer 1993: 31).

While it is true that it is an Islamic/Arabic custom and tradition to consult partners, friends, and relatives regularly, the open-door policy among Arabs is very conditional. Only a few "selected" people are generally consulted, and the manager experiences little opposition from subordinates (Bjerke and Al-meer 1993: 31). Saudi Arabia has been characterized as a high power-distance country, suggesting social distance between superiors and subordinates (Bjerke and Al-meer 1993: 34).

The situation in Saudi Arabia is unique, since men and women are segregated at places of work. After the kindergarten level, all schools and universities are sex-segregated for students, teachers, and administrators. The only exceptions to sex segregation occur in optional kindergarten programs, a few first and second grades in private schools, and medical schools.

At the university level, authority is centralized and women's section is dependent on the men's section. In men's section, the main formal authority structure, general policy and final decisions are made, particularly with regard to financial, administrative, and academic affairs. Women have only limited participation in these activities. Work rules and regulations are usually transmitted from the men's section. Few work rules are transmitted within the women's section. Senior women administrators are mainly expected to implement policy, to follow up to assure that work is getting done, and to make suggestions and recommendations in regular reports or as requested or needed. In addition, within each academic department, meetings are held infrequently between men and women via telephone.

In such a situation, in a high power-distance traditional culture with authoritarian decision-making and gender segregation, organizational communication is rather more complex. Communication is mostly one way, downward, and in written form (Triandis and Albert

1987:277). Authority messages typically are viewed as directives or commands. Messages from the men's section are explicitly recognized as official, while messages from the women's section are not as explicitly recognized as official. The latter can be withdrawn, altered, adjusted, magnified, or canceled.

Modalities used in transmitting information in Saudi Arabian organizations usually include written papers and oral telephone calls. Meetings are permitted only between top-level male and female management and only infrequently, when absolutely necessary. In such a segregated system, written communications may become more problematic and ambiguous since they lack the advantages of face-to-face communication, in which both visual (bodily) and linguistic symbol systems help to clarify messages and avoid ambiguity. Message content in the Saudi organization is either command or information. Messages usually include routine reports, memoranda, inquiries, queries, proposals, and decisions.

Such a system causes problems in organizational communication. More specifically, Al-Sabhan (1972), Jammaz (1973), Tawati (1976) and Assad (1977, 1983) found lack of proper communication to be among factors creating structural problems in higher educational institutions in Saudi Arabia. Al-Husseiny (1990) identified such problems as lack of knowledge of work rules and regulations and difficulties in communicating and coordinating with superiors.

Alswadi (1995) showed that the organizational structure of the higher educational institution she studied had negatively affected the communication process. She listed the problematic characteristics of the structure as follows: a) Centralization of authority, with the need for the men's section to approve decisions made by the women's section. The women in leadership positions had little authority. The men's decisions were perceived as more legitimate. b) The organizational charts available did not identify all organizational hierarchical levels. c) Lack of specification of different jobs, authorities and their relationships with each other. The majority of the workers did not know what their responsibilities and duties were. d) Lack of coordination between similar men's and women's departments. e)

Absence of an information center. f) Lack of clear communication channels between similar men's and women's departments. g) The physical distance between the two sections due to their gender segregation. h) Multiplication of departments led to functional and authority overlap.

Alswadi (1995) identified several communication difficulties as a result of this organizational structure. These difficulties were: 1) slow handling of documents; 2) work completion delays; 3) delay in making decisions; 4) attachment to routine; 5) inflexibility; 6) red tape; 7) employees did not go through proper communication channels; 8) the use of informal channels for information, such as employee personal experiences, oral instructions from supervisors, and asking other employees (colleagues) with longer work experience; 9) inadequate information flow; 10) information was more accessible to the men's than to the women's section, and 11) time was wasted since information flowed through several hierarchical levels.

In addition, Khiaat (1995) identified organizational structure problems experienced by female administrators at a higher educational institution in Mecca, including inadequate communication with superiors, unclear work instructions, and functional and authority overlap.

Filmban (1996) confirmed that time is wasted among senior women administrators at two higher educational institutions in Jeddah and Mecca respectively because of ineffective communication systems; lack of coordination between similar men's and women's departments; and lack of a clear division of responsibilities, duties, and authorities. She also indicated other problems with information flow such as delayed information, lack of accurate information, and delay in responses to correspondence.

Kumfer (1997), in her study of an educational institution in Mecca, found that the women's section's dependence on the men's section created such communication difficulties as telephone lines to the men's section being often busy, dependence on written rather than oral messages, and document handling delays.

Study Methods:

The population of the present study comprised 185 Saudi women engaged in administrative office work. They included 104 permanent and 81 contract employees at an educational institution in the Western Province of Saudi Arabia. Permanent employees are those hired on a permanent basis. They get paid according to the job grade level assigned to them. They are entitled to such government employment privileges as retirement pay, promotion, yearly bonus, ten days annually of emergency leave, thirty days annually of paid vacation, and paid sick leave for up to a year. Contract employees are those hired on a contract basis for six months. They get paid according to their qualifications. They are not usually entitled to such government employment privileges as retirement pay, promotion, yearly bonus, and emergency leave. However, they may receive social insurance for retirement. They are entitled to twenty days yearly of paid vacation and to paid sick leave for up to nine months. Years of work experience as a contract employee are not considered in calculating benefits if the employee later acquires a permanent position with the government. Job positions were general office workers, book-keepers, counter clerks, file clerks, typists, librarian assistants, and secretaries.

Questionnaires were administered in Arabic to the subjects at their work sites, during working hours, and in the presence of the researcher. Findings are reported in terms of total frequencies and percentages.

Employee's perceptions of the adequacy of the communication system included perceptions of the following dimensions: information availability, information timeliness, and information accuracy. Information availability included determining whether a telephone directory was available to the worker, the worker's phone calls were returned, she had adequate information to do her job, she knew whom to ask in case information was not available, and she was able to contact top management easily to get information she needed. Information timeliness included determining whether the worker received memoranda on time when work procedures changed, she

received correspondence promptly, responses to correspondence were prompt, work correspondence was processed promptly, and the calendar of events was received on time. Information accuracy included determining whether accurate information was sent, it was not necessary to call several persons to ensure accuracy of information, oral work instructions were consistent with written ones, work information was explicit and work information was concise.

Dimensions of the communication system are summarized in chart (1)

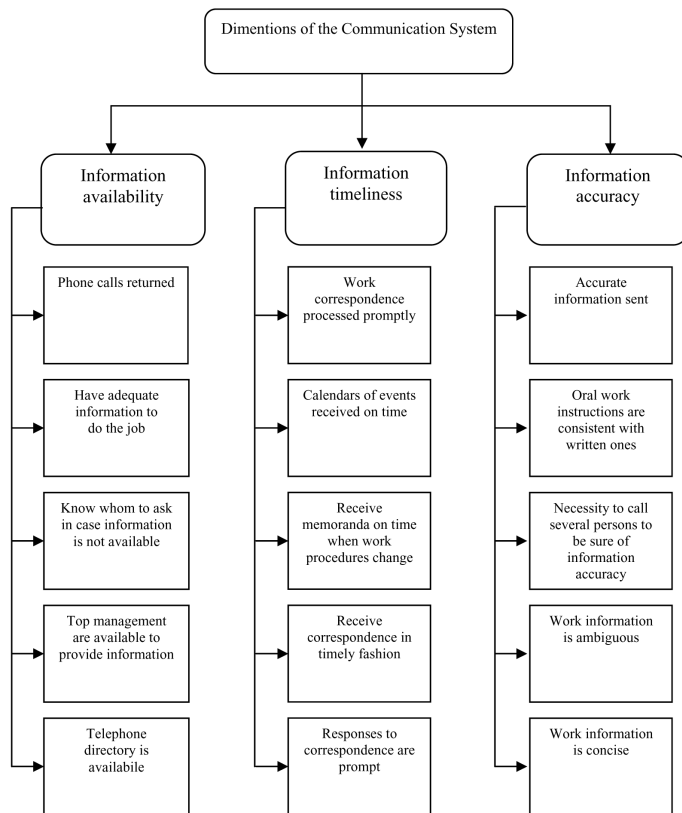


Chart 1: Dimensions of the Communication System

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population:

The majority of the respondents were married, had children, held a bachelor's degree, had specialized in majors other than administration, and were under the age of 35. All 81 contract employees earned less than 6,000 Saudi riyals (\$1 = 3.75 Saudi riyals) per month, whilst only 40 permanent employees, 38.5 percent, earned less than this amount. With respect to number of years of work experience, contract employees had less work experience than permanent employees. Among contract employees, 87.6 percent had been working no more than five years, while 61.5 percent of the permanent employees had been working for more than ten years (see Table 1).

Table 1
Summary of Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population

Factor		Contract Em- ployees		Permanent Employees		Row Totals	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
Marital Status	Married	64	79.0	72	69.2	136	73.5
	Single	17	21.0	32	30.8	49	26.5
Educational Level	No College Degree	29	35.8	26	25.0	55	29.7
	College Degree	52	64.2	78	75.0	130	70.3
Major	Liberal Arts	32	39.5	53	51.0	85	46.0
	No Major	29	35.8	26	25.0	55	29.7
	Administration	20	24.7	25	24.0	45	24.3
Monthly Income	Less than 6,000 Saudi riyals	81	100.0	40	38.5	121	65.4
	6,000 Saudi riyals or More	0	0	64	61.5	64	34.6
Age	Younger than 35	63	77.8	42	40.4	105	56.8
	35 or older	18	22.2	62	59.6	80	43.2
Years of Work Experience	1-5	71	87.6	19	18.3	90	49.0
	6-10	5	6.2	21	20.0	26	14.0
	More than 10	5	6.2	64	61.5	69	37.0
Total Responses for Each Factor		81		104		185	

Perceptions of Communication Adequacy:

Perceived information availability:

(Table 2) shows that the majority of the respondents, 80.5 percent, agreed with the statement, "The person I call returns my call;" 81.6 percent indicated having adequate information to do the job; and 62.7 percent reported that they generally knew whom to ask in case they did not have requested information. On the other hand, almost a fifth of the women in each case disagreed with the statement, "The person I call returns my call" and mentioned that they lacked adequate information to do the job; more than a third reported that they generally did not know whom to ask in case they did not have requested information and that top management was not easily available to provide such information. In addition, the majority of the women, 58.4 percent, indicated that comprehensive telephone directory was not available to workers.

Permanent employees were somewhat more likely than contract employees to say that their phone calls were returned, they had adequate information to do the job, and a telephone directory was available to them. Permanent employees were less likely than contract employees, however, to say that they knew whom to ask if they did not have requested information and that top management was available to provide information.

Table 2
Perceived Information Availability by Employment Type (Numbers in %)

Perceived Information Availability		Contract Employees N = 81	Permanent Employees N = 104	Totals 185
The person you call returns your call	Yes	75.3	84.6	80.5
	No	24.7	15.4	19.5
Have adequate information to do the job	Yes	79.0	83.7	81.6
	No	21.0	16.3	18.4
Know whom to ask in case information is not available	Yes	65.4	60.6	62.7
	No	34.6	39.4	37.3
Top management are available to provide information	Yes	61.7	58.7	60.00
	No	38.3	41.3	40.00
Telephone directory is available	Yes	40.7	42.3	41.6
	No	59.3	57.7	58.4

Perceived information timeliness:

As (table 3) shows, 78.9 percent indicated that correspondence was received promptly; 54.1 percent pointed out that response to correspondence was usually prompt; 86.5 percent stated that work correspondence was processed promptly; and 77.8 percent reported that they received calendars of events without delay. However, approximately a quarter mentioned that correspondence was not received promptly; nearly half indicated that responses to correspondence were usually not prompt; and almost a quarter reported that they did not receive calendars of events on time. In addition, the majority, 56.8 percent, stated that they did not receive memoranda on time when work procedures changed.

Table 3
Perceived Information Timelessness by Employment Type (Numbers in %)

Perceived Information Timelessness		Contract Employees N = 81	Permanent Employees N = 104	Totals 185
Receive correspondence in timely fashion	Yes	72.8	83.7	78.9
	No	27.2	16.3	21.1
Responses to correspondence are prompt	Yes	60.5	49.0	54.1
	No	39.5	51.0	45.9
Work correspondence processed promptly	Yes	80.2	91.3	86.5
	No	19.8	8.7	13.5
Calendars of events received on time	Yes	80.2	76.0	77.8
	No	19.8	24.0	22.2
Receive memoranda on time when work procedures change	Yes	49.4	38.5	43.2
	No	50.6	61.5	56.8

(Table 3) also shows that differences existed between contract and permanent employees with regard to perceived timelessness of receipt and processing of and responses to correspondence. A higher percentage of permanent employees (83.7 percent) than of contract employees (72.8 percent) believed that they were receiving correspondence without delay, and a higher percentage of permanent employees (91.3 percent) than of contract employees (80.2 percent) believed that

work correspondence was processed promptly. On the other hand, a higher percentage of contract employees (60.5 percent) as compared to permanent employees (49.0 percent) reported that responses to correspondence were prompt. A higher percentage of permanent employees (61.5 percent) than of contract employees (50.6 percent) indicated that they frequently did not receive memoranda on time when work procedures changed.

Perceived information accuracy:

(Table 4) shows that more than two-thirds of the respondents, 68.1 percent, indicated that they received inaccurate information; 60.5 percent reported that oral work instructions frequently contradicted written ones; and 61.4 percent stated that work information was not concise. More than a third, 37.8 percent, mentioned that they had to call several persons to be sure of information accuracy; and another third, 34.4 percent, reported that work information was ambiguous.

Table 4
Perceived Information Accuracy by Employment Type (Numbers in %)

Perceived Information Accuracy		Contract Employees N = 81	Permanent Employees N = 104	Totals 185
Accurate information received	Yes	33.3	30.8	31.9
	No	66.7	69.2	68.1
Oral work instructions are consistent with written ones	Yes	46.9	33.7	39.5
	No	53.1	66.3	60.5
Necessity to call several persons to be sure of information accuracy	Yes	40.7	35.6	37.8
	No	59.3	64.4	62.2
Work information is ambiguous	Yes	37.0	31.7	34.1
	No	63.0	68.3	65.9
Work information is concise	Yes	39.5	37.5	38.4
	No	60.5	62.5	61.6

(Table 4) also shows that permanent and contract employees differed slightly with regard to receiving accurate information, need to call several persons, and work information clarity and conciseness.

However, a higher percentage of permanent employees (66.3 percent) than of contract employees (53.1 percent) believed that oral work instructions often contradicted written ones.

Recommendations:

Organizations aiming to increase their effectiveness should examine communication practices among their employees and consider how these practices might be improved in order to increase employee performance level. On the basis of the above findings, the following more specific recommendations are made to facilitate organizational communication processes in the women's educational institution under study as well as in other Saudi institutions which have similar communication problems:

- 1) Conduct intensive managerial training for workers at all levels, from higher-level managers to lower-level employees. Training should focus on standard communication channels and procedures, general information guidelines, and time management. These are especially important topics in the present case since the majority of the workers do not have an academic background in administration or previous work experience with a similar job.
- 2) Grant more authority gradually to women in leadership positions to enable them to make decisions to avoid work delays.
- 3) Make organizational charts available to all employees, especially new ones, to enable them to follow communication channels.
- 4) Be ascertain that the organizational chart indicates and specifies clearly the following: a) All managerial levels for both men's and women's sections and the relationships among all managerial levels, not only the top ones; b) communication channels between the men's and women's sections; and c) the hierarchy of authority and accountability at each level of authority for information on provision and performance of employees supervised.
- 5) Reduce the managerial levels inside the institution, since excessive hierarchy leads to distortion and delay of information as messages move through numerous levels.

- 6) Maintain an updated organizational manual and include all job descriptions in it.
- 7) Provide each employee with a copy of his/her job description which clearly outlines job duties and employee rights.
- 8) Establish an information center in both the men's and women's sections and link these centers to each other.
- 9) Provide all offices with modern communication equipment such as faxes and computers and at least one comprehensive telephone directory for each office.
- 10) Work information should not be overwhelming. Excessively detailed messages can confuse rather than clarify. Work information should also be sent at convenient times and through appropriate communication channels.
- 11) Work instructions should be short, simple, accurate, and clear.

Summary:

The results of this study seem to be in congruence with those of other studies by Al-Swadi (1995), Khiat (1995), Filmбан (1996), and Kumfer (1997). In the present study, the growing size of the institution due to the ever increasing number of students and employees, the nature of the organizational structure, physical distance between the women's and men's sections due to the gender segregation, and the centralization of authority have a negative effect on the free and accurate flow of information and organizational communication.

The majority of the respondents found communication in their institution adequate in the following respects: persons you call return your call, have adequate information to do the job, know whom to ask if do not have requested information, correspondence is received promptly, responses to correspondence are prompt, work correspondence is processed promptly, calender of events is received without delay, and there is no need to call several persons to be sure of accuracy of information. The minority of the respondents in many of these cases disagreed, however, indicating that the institution needs to improve in these regards. Of even greater concern is the fact that the majority of the workers found that communication was inadequate in other

respects: availability to workers of a comprehensive telephone directory, availability of top management to provide information; prompt receipt of memoranda when work procedures change; and receipt of accurate information, oral work instructions which are consistent with written ones, and concise information. While the institution needs to give particular attention to these latter areas, it should not be complacent with any of the areas studied to operate effectively.

The study also shows very little differences between contract and permanent employees with regard to their perception of the adequacy of communication practices. Permanent employees were more likely to evaluate the communication system as inadequate than contract employees were in three respects. A higher percentage of the permanent than of the contract employees reported that responses to correspondence were not prompt, memoranda were not on time when work procedures changed, and oral work instructions often contradicted written ones. Thus communication problems were not confined to contract employees but afflicted employees regardless of their employment status.

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