

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS AND ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION: AN AUSTRALIAN RETAIL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This study uses an empirical case study to examine the relationship between flexible work arrangements (whether employees work on a full-time or part-time basis) and communication satisfaction. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from employees in a major Australian retail organisation resulting in 127 useable responses. The survey included the Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (Downs and Hazen, 1977). Overall, respondents' ratings of communication satisfaction indicated that at best they were only slightly satisfied. Part-time employees were significantly more dissatisfied than full-time employees on four dimensions of communication satisfaction and the study provides evidence that part-time employees were outside mainstream communication in the organisation examined. The implications of the results for job satisfaction, performance, and human resource management are discussed. Future research directions are identified.

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FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS AND ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION: AN AUSTRALIAN RETAIL EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

The Australian retail industry is coping with the deregulation of trading hours and changing customer demands by relying on flexible work arrangements to adjust the labour supply. Many supermarkets now remain open 24 hours per day, seven days per week and companies rely heavily on part-time employees to work the 'unsocial' hours late at night and at weekends. Thus, the contribution of the part-time workforce is critical for organisational success in the retail industry. Although the new work arrangements reduce labour costs, a major study which analysed data from *The Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey* (Callus, Morehead, Cully and Buchanan, 1991) concluded that part-time employees fare less well than full-time employees in terms of pay rates, job security, training, and autonomy (Harley, 1994). However, very little research has been undertaken concerning the impact of work arrangements on organisational operations. The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between work arrangements and organisational communication using a case-study approach in an Australian retail organisation.

Part-time employees work fewer than 35 hours per week (Lewis, 1990). Currently, around 26 per cent of the Australian workforce are employed on a part-time basis (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999) and represent a growing segment of the workforce (Norris, 1993). The growth rate in part-time employment in Australia between 1966 and 1994 was 5.5 per cent per annum which was over three and a half times the rate of full-time employment growth (1.5 per cent per annum) (*Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training*, 1999 p. 136).

Traditionally, there has been an assumption evident in the research literature that employees engaged in part-time work held unimportant jobs that had little impact on organisational success (Feldman and Doeringhaus, 1992). In terms of the 'flexible firm' model (Atkinson, 1985; Storey and Sisson, 1993), part-time employees were considered part of the peripheral workforce along with casual, temporary, and contract workers (Harley, 1994) who provided the firm with functional, numerical, and financial flexibility. Part-time employees were positioned outside the core group of permanent workers who performed the organisation's critical firm-specific activities. More recently, the characterisation of the workforce into relatively distinct, dichotomous groups has been challenged. For example, Walsh and Deery (1999) suggested that part-time and temporary workers might constitute numerically and strategically the core component of a company's workforce. Further, over the last decade there has been a shift in terms of the type of work undertaken on a part-time basis. For example, a decade ago, supervisory and managerial positions were generally held by full-time employees considered part of the core, while now there is evidence that these positions may be undertaken on a part-time basis (Delsen, 1998). Part-time employees are no longer limited to informal, uncertain or irregular work. Thus, in a number of respects, part-time employees make an important contribution to the essential rather than supplementary workforce.

Previous research on part-time employment has focused on demographic trends to account for the growth of part-time employment (Dawkins and Norris, 1995; Romeyn, 1992), on voluntary/involuntary employment and the differences between full-time and part-time employees' job attitudes (Deery and Mahony, 1994; Jackofsky and Peters, 1987; O'Reilly and Fagan, 1988; Tansky, Gallagher and Wetzel, 1997), and the characteristics, perceptions, and preferences of peripheral workers (Walsh and Deery, 1999). There is strong evidence that part-time employees have become marginalised in terms of job security, standard benefits, training, and career paths generally associated with full-time status (Burgess, 1996; Feldman and Doeringhaus, 1992) which could be expected to affect part-time worker commitment, motivation, and performance (Mayne, Tregaskis and Brewster, 1996). In a study of organisational commitment among part-time employees, Tansky, Gallagher and Wetzel (1997) concluded that part-time employees' attitudes toward their jobs depended largely on their perceptions of their treatment relative to full-time employees. Overall, there is considerable evidence in the literature that although part-time employees may tolerate working non-standard and unsocial hours, there are high levels of dissatisfaction with overall conditions which may affect performance.

Employees engaged in non-standard work arrangements may be marginalised in terms of the exchange of information in organisations. For example, a survey conducted in 1995 of casual and non-casual workers concerning workplace change reported that 59 per cent of non-casual workers compared to 38 per cent of casual workers had been 'consulted about workplace change' while 54 per cent of non-casual workers and 46 per cent of casuals had been 'given a fair chance to have a say' (*Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training*, 1999, p. 141). Overall the findings indicate that a high proportion of casuals and non-casuals were not informed about workplace change which suggests that workers, including part-time employees may be experiencing some degree of disruption to the 'standard' patterns of communication. Any deterioration to communication systems may cause employee

dissatisfaction and could have dysfunctional consequences for a company geared towards high quality customer service. The reliance of supermarkets on the part-time workforce to staff stores on a continuous basis may place an added burden on communication processes. Recently, Olekalns (2001) suggested that the impact of work arrangements on organisational communication should be investigated. The main purpose of this study is to address the deficiency in the research literature by examining whether communication satisfaction is significantly different for part-time employees compared to full-time employees under the new work arrangements where businesses trade continuously.

Communication is critical in organisations for connecting employees and permitting organisations to function (Downs, 1988; Hargie, Dickson and Tourish, 1999). Several authors note that internal organisational communication is important for improving employee productivity and performance and for positive organisational outcomes (Argenti, 1998; Clampitt and Downs, 1993; Goris, Vaught and Pettit, 2000; Pettit, Goris and Vaught, 1997; Rodwell, Kienzie and Shadur, 1998). For example, how employees perceive supervisory communication style and content as well as the organisation's communication system influences the level of job satisfaction (Pettit, Goris and Vaught, 1997). Although organisational communication has been widely studied over the last thirty years, researchers have called for further investigation of organisational communication and its relationship to performance and satisfaction (Pettit, Goris and Vaught, 1997). Further, Kovacic (1997) suggested that to further understanding of organisations as 'communicative phenomena', research needs to be conducted concerning communication processes as they are enacted in actual organisational contexts. Based on these recommendations, the current study examines organisational communication using a case study approach.

Organisational communication has been examined from two perspectives which are evident in the research literature, namely the process perspective concerning the flow of information (e.g. Clampitt, 1991; Jablin, Putnam, Roberts and Porter, 1987) and the perception perspective concerning employee perceptions and attitudes (e.g. Downs and Hazen, 1977). Research on the perception of communication is based on the premise that an individual's cognitive and affective perceptions of the organisation will influence that individual's behaviour in the organisation (Goldhaber, Porter, Yates, and Lesniak, 1978). In other words, where employees are exposed to appropriate communication (eg, receive timely and adequate feedback, are kept informed of changes) favourable organisational outcomes would be expected.

The perception perspective has been investigated empirically using measures of communication satisfaction defined as a 'summing up' of an individual's satisfaction with information flow and relationship variables (Downs and Hazen, 1977). These aspects of communication underpin the exchange of information and transmission of meaning throughout the organisation and therefore, measuring communication satisfaction should be a useful gauge to the climate and 'health' of the organisation (Downs, 1988). According to Hunt, Tourish and Hargie (2000, p. 120), the organisational climate develops out of the communication behaviours of organisation members. Thus, "communication is not just important [for] getting a message across, it is also central to the development and maintenance of positive working relationships, harmony and trust."

The construct of communication satisfaction has been shown to be multi-dimensional; in other words, individuals may hold different levels of satisfaction for different organisational communication variables (Crino and White, 1981, Downs and Hazen, 1977). Several instruments have been developed to assess communication satisfaction (Downs and Hazen, 1977; Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979; Hecht, 1978). The Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire is considered the most comprehensive instrument to assess the direction of information flows, the formal and informal channels of communication flow, relationships with various members of the organisation and the forms of communication (Pincus, 1986). The aim of the current study is to investigate whether part-time employees have significantly different levels of communication satisfaction compared to full-time employees in an Australian retail organisation.

METHOD

An empirical case study was conducted of a large Australian supermarket chain in order to explore the communication processes in a single organisation. Malan and Kriger (1998) advocated the conduct of single organisation studies to advance understanding of the complex networks of socially and personally constructed meaning. Surveys were distributed at seven stores in the Melbourne metropolitan area resulting in a total of 127 useable responses (a 30% response rate). Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered by means of a questionnaire which included the instrument, the Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ) developed by Downs and Hazen (1977). Respondents discussed their satisfaction with communication in response to the questions "How satisfied are you with communication at work?" and

“What suggestions do you have to improve communication at work?” Of the 127 useable responses received to the survey, 103 respondents provided comments in response to the open-ended questions.

A major supermarket organisation was selected for the study where more than half of the staff are employed on a part-time basis at stores which are open 24 hours per day, seven days per week. The company’s vision statement emphasises the importance of meeting customer needs. The provision of high-quality customer service relies on efficient communication among staff and between staff and customers. Questionnaires were distributed to store level employees to gather data on the perceptions of communication satisfaction at the operative level.

Sample

The sample was identical to the organisation’s population distribution of 52% males and 48% females. Over half of the respondents were aged between 20 and 29 years of age (54%) and a further 20% were under 20 years. Department managers represented 30% of respondents, 20% were supervisors and 50% were operatives. While 45% of the respondents worked on a full-time basis, 55% were part-time. Around half the sample (52%) were studying at post-secondary level, while nearly one quarter (22%) had not completed secondary school and one quarter had completed secondary school only (26%). A high proportion of part-time employees (70%) were undertaking or had completed post-secondary education, while only one-third (32%) of full-time employees were studying or had completed post-secondary education. In terms of length of service to the organisation, 25% of full-time and 17% of part-time employees had worked for the organisation for less than one year, 31% of full-time and 51% of part-time employees had been with the organisation for between one and five years, while 44% of full-time and 32% of part-time employees had worked for the company for at least five years.

Instrumentation

The Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ) (Downs and Hazen, 1977), a 40-item instrument with a reported overall reliability of 0.94 (Greenbaum, Clampitt and Willihnganz, 1988) was used to rate satisfaction with aspects of communication in the workplace on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1= *very dissatisfied* to 7= *very satisfied*. Research conducted by Downs and Hazen (1977) into communication satisfaction identified eight factors and several studies have confirmed the factor structure (Crino and White 1981; Downs, 1988; Varona, 1996). The factors identified by Downs (1988) are as follows: (1) Horizontal Communication: the extent to which informal communication is accurate and free flowing and includes perceptions of the grapevine; (2) Subordinate Communication: upward and downward communication with subordinates. Only workers in supervisory positions responded to these items which included subordinate responsiveness to downward communication and the extent to which subordinates initiate upward communication; (3) Media Quality: the extent to which meetings are well organised and written directives are short and clear; (4) Organisational Perspective: information about the organisation as a whole which includes notifications about changes, overall policies, and goals of the organisation; (5) Organisational Integration: the degree to which individuals receive information about their immediate work environment; (6) Communication Climate: the extent to which communication in an organisation motivates and stimulates workers to meet organisational goals; (7) Personal Feedback: information concerning how workers are being judged and how their performance is being appraised; and (8) Supervisory Communication: the upward and downward aspects of communicating with superiors.

Analyses of Data

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the statistical software package, AMOS 4.0 (Arbuckle and Wothke, 1999) was conducted to test the theoretically derived, hypothetical structures of the instrument. CFA overcomes the limitations associated with mathematically determined factor structures using exploratory factor analysis (Long, 1983). Specific relationships among observed indicator items were identified and tested using the most basic form of CFA, one-factor congeneric measurement models as described by Jöreskog (1971). The fit measures for the CFA of communication satisfaction resulted in a model with a χ^2/df ratio of 1.71, a Goodness-of-Fit Index of 0.94, an Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index of 0.94, a Standardized Root Mean Residual of 0.04 and all comparative fit indices above 0.90. All composite

factor reliability coefficients were above 0.86. The results substantiated the content validity of the instrument and confirmed the multi-dimensional factor structure suggested in previous studies (Crino and White, 1981; Downs, 1988; Downs and Hazen, 1977; Varona, 1996).

A Pearson correlation matrix was calculated to determine the strength of relationships between composite factors. T-tests were calculated to determine if there were significant differences of means between full-time and part-time respondents for each communication satisfaction factor. Multiple regression analysis was used to analyse the relationships among several independent variables and each dependent communication satisfaction factor for full-time and part-time employees.

R e s u l t s

Communication satisfaction

Table 1 presents the correlation matrix for the communication satisfaction factors which indicates that there were significant positive correlations among almost all of the factors and suggests that the communication satisfaction factors are closely related to each other. Overall, the mean communication satisfaction scores for the eight factors as shown in Table 1 indicate that respondents at best were only slightly satisfied with organisational communication. Respondents indicated the highest levels of satisfaction for Subordinate Communication (4.98) and Supervisory Communication (4.76), indicating an overall satisfaction of almost 'slightly satisfied' in communicating with their superiors and subordinates. Personal Feedback (3.62) and Communication Climate (3.77) were rated as the aspects of least satisfaction with mean scores classified as 'slightly dissatisfied'.

Table 1 here

Communication Satisfaction and Work Arrangements

Table 2 presents the results of t -tests conducted to compare the means for communication satisfaction factors by work arrangement groups. There were significant differences between full-time and part-time employees for Supervisory Communication ($t=2.18$, $p<.05$), Communication Climate ($t=2.14$, $p<.05$), Media Quality ($t=2.10$, $p<.05$), and Organisational Perspective ($t=3.74$, $p<.001$). For each of these factors, part-time employees recorded significantly lower levels of communication satisfaction than full-time employees. All four factors predominantly focus on the level of satisfaction with the content and flow of information within the organisation and therefore, the results suggest that part-time employees are less satisfied with the information they receive than full-time employees.

Table 2 here

T -tests and Analyses of variance were conducted to assess the differences between group mean scores for communication satisfaction factors by background variables including gender, age, education, length of service, and position in the company. There were no significant differences between males and females for any of the communication satisfaction factors. Significant differences were evident for age, education, length of service, and position which warranted further investigation. Stepwise multiple regression was used to examine the interactions of independent variables in predicting changes in each of the communication satisfaction factors for full-time and part-time respondents. Table 3 presents the stepwise multiple regression analysis for the prediction of communication satisfaction among full-time respondents. Table 3 indicates that age was a significant predictor of communication satisfaction, namely Organisational Perspective ($\beta=.35$, $p<.01$). The results suggest that older full-time employees had a better understanding about the organisation as a whole including the policies and goals of the organisation. For full-time employees, length of service was a significant predictor of communication satisfaction, namely Supervisor Communication ($\beta=.50$, $p<.001$), Personal Feedback ($\beta=.39$, $p<.001$), Communication Climate ($\beta=.50$, $p<.001$), and Organisational Integration ($\beta=.43$, $p<.001$). The results suggest that the greater the length of service with the company, the more satisfied full-time employees are with the information they receive concerning the organisation as a whole, their immediate work environment, and their performance.

Table 3 here

In contrast, for part-time employees, length of service was not a significant predictor for any of the communication satisfaction factors even though 32% of part-time respondents had worked for the company for at least five years (compared to 44% of full-time respondents). The results suggest that length of service does not insure that part-time employees will have greater communication satisfaction.

Table 4 presents the stepwise multiple regression analysis for the prediction of communication satisfaction among part-time respondents. The results indicate that level of education was a significant predictor for part-time employees of Personal Feedback ($\beta=-.39$, $p<.001$), Communication Climate ($\beta=-.41$, $p<.001$), Media Quality ($\beta=-.43$, $p<.001$), Organisational Perspective ($\beta=-.48$, $p<.001$), and Organisational Integration ($\beta=-.25$, $p<.05$). For each communication satisfaction factor, higher educational attainment among part-time employees predicted greater communication dissatisfaction. The results suggest that employees undertaking higher education may have higher expectations to be kept informed and therefore are less satisfied with communication than less-educated part-time employees. In contrast, educational attainment was not a significant predictor for full-time employees for any of the communication satisfaction factors even though 32% of full-time respondents had undertaken higher education.

DISCUSSION

This study was undertaken to explore communication satisfaction among part-time and full-time employees at a company which operates supermarkets on a continuous basis. A key finding of the study is that employees in the organisation surveyed were generally dissatisfied with all aspects of communication. These results are similar to low scores evident in a study of communication satisfaction in the banking industry (Walther, 1988). The results in the current study are consistent with the findings from previous studies (eg., Clampitt and Downs, 1993; Varona, 1996) which indicate that the areas of greatest employee satisfaction are Supervisory and Subordinate Communication, while the area of least satisfaction tends to be Personal Feedback.

Respondents rated Supervisory and Subordinate Communication between 'neutral' and 'slightly satisfied'. In other words, respondents were least dissatisfied with upward and downward aspects of communication. Concerns about the quality of interpersonal communication were evident in comments such as: "The arrogance of some senior members when questions are asked [and] general rudeness affect my commitment." Some comments suggested that respondents wanted more information, such as: "Communication is scarce" and "communication should work down the company hierarchy. At this store it stops at management." According to Hargie (1997), insufficient supervisory communication is a concern as the lack of communication may lead to employee confusion on how to achieve goals.

Several comments indicated that respondents were critical of the lack of response by management to upward communication. For example: "It seems a lot of information is forced down the ranks but not much goes back up" and "In such a large bureaucracy, our concerns are often voiced but little is done about remedying problems." Receptivity of communication, the extent to which workers perceive the organisation responding to upward communication may be closely linked to communication expectations and perceived organisational support (Buckley, Monks and Sinnott, 1998). These aspects are important in defining and strengthening the employment relationship (Barnes, 1995) and therefore, require attention to improve overall organisational communication.

The findings concerning Supervisory and Subordinate Communication are consistent with a study conducted in the U.S. of 5,000 employees which indicated that the single biggest criticism employees have of companies is that upward communication is not encouraged to the same extent as downward communication (Argenti, 1998). Similarly, another study of employee job satisfaction concluded that employees who were more satisfied with their jobs believed they had more opportunities for discussion with their superiors, more recognition of their opinions, and greater opportunities for self-disclosure (Callan, 1993). Therefore, the results suggest that the communication relationship with superiors may play a critical role in determining employee job satisfaction. In previous studies of the relationship between communication and job satisfaction, three factors, namely Personal Feedback, Communication Climate, and Supervisory Communication have been most strongly correlated with job satisfaction measures (Downs, 1977; Pincus, 1986). Consequently, the results in the current study suggest that the overall low levels of communication satisfaction may be associated with low levels of job satisfaction.

Horizontal Communication was another aspect that respondents rated as 'neutral' to 'slightly satisfying'. Comments such as "The grapevine runs rife as it's the major communication tool" and "You always hear things second hand" provided evidence that employees depended on the grapevine for information. According to Gilsdorf, (1998), informal channels of communication such as the grapevine often fill the gaps that formal communication fails to address. However, heavy reliance on informal channels suggests that employees are not obtaining sufficient information through formal channels (Guffey, 1997). Therefore, the heavy reliance on informal channels of communication may be symptomatic of dysfunctional organisational communication.

Respondents were most dissatisfied with Personal Feedback. The impact of positive and negative feedback on employees was highlighted by several respondents. For example: "If people noticed the work and extra effort we put into the company and gave positive feedback [it] would make me more satisfied with communication." The comment reflects a desire for recognition, information about performance, and praise from managers. The lack of satisfaction employees perceived with Personal Feedback is important because feedback provides useful information about how effectively the work is being performed that no other source can provide (Clampitt and Downs, 1993). Therefore, the findings may have implications for performance

given that in a study by Clampitt and Downs (1993), Personal Feedback had the greatest impact on self-rated respondent productivity. Feedback is important for motivating workers, and a study by Mayfield, Mayfield, and Kopf (1998) demonstrated that a leader's use of motivating language significantly improved worker performance and job satisfaction. Thus, dissatisfaction with feedback may depress employee performance and job satisfaction.

The overall lack of satisfaction with Communication Climate was also evident in comments made by respondents. Comments such as: "Any communication would be helpful" and "[We need] a system of communication based on the idea that it would work toward the greater good - store, company goals" suggest that some employees felt that they were not receiving sufficient information to feel motivated to work toward organisational goals. Therefore, the comments highlight an important aspect of communication satisfaction concerning the provision of adequate information. According to Argenti (1998, p.200), "enlightened managers know that the more information they provide to employees, the more likely these employees are to be highly motivated to do a better job, to advance in their positions, and to further the goals of the organisation itself."

Respondents were generally dissatisfied with Organisational Perspective which relates to the perceived general lack of information concerning organisational policies, goals, and changes as evident in the comment: "People are not made aware of changes." Strauss and McGrath (1994) suggested that employees who believe they are not well informed may have feelings of depersonalisation (for example, treating customers as numbers) and a sense of anonymity. A recent study by Boorum, Goolsby and Ramsey (1998) demonstrated a link between employee communication competence and sales performance. Further, Goebel (1999) established that effective internal communication leads to increased levels of external customer orientation. Therefore, employee dissatisfaction with organisational communication may have a negative impact in the retail industry where customer service is paramount.

There were significant differences between full-time and part-time employees on four communication satisfaction factors which focus on the level of satisfaction with the content and flow of information within the organisation. The results suggest that part-time employees were less satisfied with the information they received than full-time employees. The significant differences between full-time and part-time employees for Organisational Perspective are consistent with the results from another study which concluded that powerless groups (women and hourly workers) perceived less support and received less information than other groups (Allen and Griffeth, 1997). Similarly, in a study of communication satisfaction in the banking industry by Walther (1988) using the Communication Audit Survey (Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979), part-time employees were less satisfied than full-time employees in regard to information received. The lack of information may contribute to the sense of isolation that accompanies part-time work status as identified by Sherer and Coakley (1999).

Improving Media Quality (the extent to which meetings are well organized and written directives are short and clear) will present a challenge to the organisation. As one respondent commented: "Memos are left around like litter and nobody takes any notice of team talks." A high proportion of part-time employees makes it very difficult to organise meetings and therefore, effective handover procedures need to be implemented and alternative channels of communication are required to keep staff informed. Several respondents made suggestions to improve the delivery of messages, for example, respondents suggested that clear, concise, written instructions should be strategically placed near cash registers and information updates could be included with payslips.

Length of service had a positive impact on communication satisfaction for full-time employees but for part-time employees, length of service with the company (e.g., more than five years) did not lead to greater communication satisfaction. The results may be symptomatic of the general dissatisfaction with the employment arrangements that many part-time employees experience. In the current study, 70% of part-time employees were undertaking or had completed post-secondary education which would suggest that they regarded their part-time positions as temporary. This conclusion is supported by Walsh and Deery's (1999) study which identified a group of 'reluctant part-timers' in the retail industry who were engaged in part-time work while searching for full-time positions.

Implications for Human Resource Management

The high levels of communication dissatisfaction evident in the current study have implications for Human Resource Management (HRM). According to Sims (1994), HRM should be the primary conduit for open and integrative communication processes within an organisation and therefore, HRM should play a pivotal role to enact strategies to improve communication. HRM should be proactive in undertaking store-wide communication audits to monitor communication satisfaction among all staff and to identify barriers which impede open and effective communication.

In the current study, part-time employees were more dissatisfied than full-time employees on four dimensions of communication satisfaction all related to informational aspects of communication. Ideally, part-time employees should have the same knowledge and capabilities as full-time members of staff in order to present a seamless image of the company to customers regardless of individual employment arrangements. Supervisors need to be aware that part-time employees may be missing out on important information and therefore strategies need to be implemented so that part-time employees are included in the communication loop.

Staff would benefit from having a greater awareness of their communication behaviours. Training programs should be designed to improve openness of communication which has a positive relationship with subordinate motivation (Kay and Christophel, 1995). Therefore, communication skill development could lead to improvements in employee motivation.

Training programs to develop communication skills among all employees should be aligned with the company's strategic vision of providing 'excellence in customer service'. The link established between employee communication competence and sales performance (Boorum, Goolsby and Ramsey, 1998) suggests that improving employee communication satisfaction may have a flow-on effect for communication with customers. Therefore, well-designed communication training programs should assist in improving customer service.

The reported lack of personal feedback suggests that performance management systems should be reviewed. HRM should assist supervisors to communicate clear, specific expectations and to give informal, positive and negative feedback frequently. According to White (1996), part-time employees are often excluded from performance management systems and development schemes which reinforces the perception that part-time employees are not expected to make a long-term commitment. The Employment in Britain Survey (White, 1996) found that only 33 per cent of part-time compared to 52 per cent of full-time managers had undergone performance appraisals. Therefore, action should be taken to ensure that part-time employees are included in performance appraisals.

The recruitment of tertiary students for part-time positions will continue but HR managers need to develop career paths to attract and retain the staff who are likely to make a long-term, valuable contribution. Such programs would assist in preventing a turnover culture from becoming entrenched (Iverson and Deery, 1997).

The results have important implications for managing change as communication appears central to predicting outcomes of planned change efforts (Lewis, 2000). Where managers fail to involve employees in the decision-making process, employees feel alienated and less willing to accept changes that are imposed upon them (Argenti, 1998). In comparison, clear, consistent communication which improves understanding of the context of change reduces employee anxiety and resistance to change (Brimm and Murdock, 1998).

Overcoming persistent communication problems and improving the communication climate would assist in developing positive work relationships (Hunt et al., 2000). Further, effective communication which reduces uncertainty and enhances personal control reduces occupational stress and burnout and improves social support (Berlin Ray, 1993; Miller, Ellis, Zook and Lyles, 1990). Where communication is dysfunctional, the incidence of staff illness, turnover, and litigation has been shown to increase (Hargie et al., 1999). Therefore, HRM initiatives to develop effective communication should improve coordination and control of organisational processes.

Apart from the reduction of labour costs, part-time work arrangements represent an HRM strategy which addresses the issue of diversity in the workforce and may facilitate a better balance between work/life commitments for employees. However, the strategy may be counter-productive if part-time employment merely "fits non-standard workers into inflexible systems designed for full-time employees" (Edward and Robinson, 1999, p. 15). Unless part-time employees can be fully integrated and kept informed, their lack of communication satisfaction may impede the effectiveness of their contribution.

Limitations

The findings of this study are limited by the company specific nature of the sample and therefore, the unique characteristics of the organisation from which the sample was drawn may affect the generalisability of the results. Consequently, the study should be replicated using samples that represent a diverse range of occupations and include banking, nursing, and hospitality where part-time employees represent a high proportion of the workforce. A longitudinal design could advance research on communication satisfaction and its relationship to key dependent variables such as job satisfaction, performance, productivity, and organisational commitment. Further research should be conducted into the relationship between internal customer relations among staff and the interpersonal communication process involved in serving external customers.

CONCLUSION

The current study represents a preliminary step in clarifying part-time employees' attitudes toward communication at work relative to full-time employees. The results indicated low levels of communication satisfaction among employees in the retail company investigated. The study raises concerns that the high levels of communication dissatisfaction may lead to a lack of employee job satisfaction and inhibit performance.

The study indicates that the organisation examined needs to enact strategies to improve communication which could lead to positive work outcomes such as increased effort and improved performance. In conclusion, this study reinforces the importance of communication in organisations and serves as a reminder of the need for organisations to concentrate on developing this fundamental, complex, and all-pervasive organisational activity.

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Note: The Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire is available from:
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Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlations for the Study (N=127)

Variables	Mean	SD	α^a	Correlations						
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Communication Satisfaction^b										
1. Horizontal Communication	4.53	1.23	.81							
2. Subordinate Communication	4.98	1.45	.92	.51***						
3. Media Quality	4.01	1.46	.88	.71***	.35**					
4. Organisational Perspective	4.13	1.30	.84	.61***	.45***	.64***				
5. Organisational Integration	4.29	1.30	.79	.57***	.39**	.67***	.80***			
6. Communication Climate	3.77	1.57	.91	.45***	.32*	.82***	.68***	.72***		
7. Personal Feedback	3.62	1.49	.88	.68***	.24	.67***	.71***	.80***	.81***	
8. Supervisory Communication	4.76	1.49	.88	.45***	.39**	.60***	.57***	.66***	.44***	.69***

^a Cronbach alpha co-efficient. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

^b 1=*very dissatisfied*, 2=*dissatisfied*, 3=*slightly dissatisfied*, 4=*neutral*, 5=*slightly satisfied*, 6=*satisfied*, 7=*very satisfied*.

Table 2: T-tests for Mean Communication Satisfaction Factors by Work Arrangements (N=127)

Communication Satisfaction Factors ^a	Mean	Mean	Mean Diff.	t
	Full-time (1) (n=57)	Part-time (2) (n=70)		
Horizontal Communication	4.74	4.35	0.39	1.74
Media Quality	4.17	3.65	0.52	2.10*
Organisational Perspective	4.63	3.69	0.94	3.74**
Organisational Integration	4.62	4.23	0.39	1.63
Communication Climate	4.01	3.41	0.60	2.14*
Personal Feedback	3.80	3.32	0.48	1.74
Supervisory Communication	5.12	4.50	0.62	2.18*

^a 1=*Very dissatisfied*, 2=*Dissatisfied*, 3=*Slightly dissatisfied*, 4=*Neutral*, 5=*Slightly satisfied*, 6=*Satisfied*, 7=*Very satisfied*.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Subordinate Communication was excluded as only respondents at managerial level (n=63) were required to respond to these items.

Table 3: Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for the Prediction of Communication Satisfaction Factors^a
(Full-time employees N=57)

Predictor	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std Error	t	β
Supervisor Communication						
Length of service	.50	.25	.24	1.30	4.29	.50***
Personal Feedback						
Length of service	.39	.15	.14	1.55	3.14	.39***
Communication Climate						
Length of service	.36	.13	.11	1.52	2.91	.37**
Organisational Perspective						
Age	.35	.12	.10	1.41	2.74	.35**
Organisational Integration						
Length of service	.43	.18	.17	1.25	3.53	.43***

^a There were no predictors for Horizontal Communication, Media Quality or Subordinate Communication
*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Table 4: Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for the Prediction of Communication Satisfaction Factors^a
(Part-time employees N=68)

Predictor	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std Error	t	β
Personal Feedback						
Level of education	.39	.16	.14	1.31	-3.49	-.39***
Communication Climate						
Level of education	.41	.16	.14	1.38	-3.60	-.41***
Media Quality						
Level of education	.43	.18	.17	1.34	-3.82	-.43***
Organisational Perspective						
Level of education	.48	.23	.22	1.13	-4.42	-.48***
Organisational Integration						
Level of education	.25	.06	.05	1.23	-2.08	-.25*

^a There were no predictors for Supervisory Communication, Horizontal Communication or Subordinate Communication.
*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001