COMMUNICATION BARRIERS IN THE WORKPLACE: A STUDY IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: *Effective communication is a key for organisational success, yet many barriers can limit it, leading to poor employee performance. Therefore, this study was conducted to identify the main barriers to effective communication among colleagues. This study used quantitative approach through an online questionnaire. Respondents were all staff members of Kolej Komuniti Sandakan. Findings showed an interesting insight, where physical and environmental barriers caused the most impact to poor communication. There were issues related to digital communication tools they are using, poor internet connectivity, improper workspace layout, noise distractions, and physical distance between units. Furthermore, psychological and emotional barriers also lead to communication barriers. It is largely due to work stress, negative attitudes among colleagues, and personal conflicts. Cultural and perceptual barriers also affect communication, where individuals understand messages in different ways, messages are interpreted based on personal perceptions, staff avoid expressing disagreement, and cultural norms of not to speak out. In addition, organisational and hierarchical barriers was also found to give effect to poor communication. It is due to message changes when passed through multiple people and too many hierarchy layers slow down communication. Language and semantic barriers were the least problematic, though some messages were unclear due to inappropriate word choice. This study recommends top management to upgrade and standardise digital communication tools to ensure reliability and ease of use, as well as improving internet infrastructure. Workspace layouts should be reviewed, and regular online meetings should be scheduled to maintain consistent communication. Stress management programme and team building are crucial to help improve relationships, reduce negative attitudes, and resolve personal conflicts among colleagues. Cultural awareness training can help staff understand different communication styles and perspectives. Important information should be communicated directly through official platforms or written documentation to ensure consistency and reduce distortion, hence promoting a good communication practice.*

Keywords*: communication, barriers, workplace*

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Introduction

Effective communication plays an important role on organisational success. It directly impacts employee's performance, productivity and collaboration. Many previous studies indicate that a quality communication give a significant influence on teamwork, building trust among colleagues and creating a sufficient work process (Rahmasari, 2022). When communication is transparent, employee will understand tasks and responsibilities, make informed decisions, collaborate as needed and later enhance organisational performance (Rodrick, 2024). In addition, an effective communication practice in workplace can reduce errors, strengthen relationship and trust between supervisor and staff, building a great teamwork (Rodrick, 2024). Consistency and openness communication can increase employee's motivation as they feel the presence of supportive environment.

In contrast, ineffective communication practice in the workplace leads to negative effects on both employees and organisational outcomes. When information being transferred vaguely, it causes misunderstandings, delay, task errors and poor productivity (Yeh & Tsai, 2022). Poor communication also leads to employee's low morale and engagement as they were uninformed, ignored, frustrated and later demotivated (Axios HQ, 2025). Moreover, some employee may become stress and tent build conflicts with the top management as well as team members, making collaboration become weaker. Over time, those personal issues can break trust between employees and management, hinder decision making and lower overall organisational performance. These highlights the importance of practicing effective communication for a healthy working environment. Therefore, addressing communication barriers is a must in order to come out with a suitable insight on how to improve communication process in workplace, especially in educational institution. Therefore, this study was conducted to identify the main barriers to effective communication among the staff of Kolej Komuniti Sandakan.

This study is very important because it can provide valuable insights to both top management and staff members in all institution, especially Politeknik and Kolej Komuniti in Malaysia. By identifying the barriers, management can come out with an effective targeted interventions to improve information flow, enhance collaboration, and foster a more supportive work environment. Ultimately, all members in an organisation may find ways to share clearer information, reduce misunderstanding, making a stronger teamwork, wiser decision making, on top it a higher organisational excellency.

Literature Review

Previous studies on communication barriers showed that physical and environmental factors can significantly obstruct information exchange among employees. The factors include workplace layout, poor workstation arrangements, noise, and distance between units (Bahrain, Sakrani, & Maidin, 2023). For instance, poorly designed office can reduce interactions among employees. In addition, technological issues such as unstable internet connections can interrupt communication. With the increase frequency of online meeting and classes, physical and technological barriers have become major issues. This shows the importance of upgrading in more modern infrastructure and designed practical workspaces to maintain smooth communication and support employee collaboration (Alkoud, Zainudin & Sarif, 2023).

Besides, language and semantic barriers are found to be among major obstacles, commonly in diverse workforces. Unclear language, jargon and poor language proficiency can lead to misunderstandings as well as misinterpretation of messages. It significantly causes reduce job performance, task accuracy and team efficiency (Bahrain et al., 2023). Employees struggle to

interpret written communication such as emails, memos, or reports, especially when some terms are used without explanation. These barriers emphasise the need for organisations to practice standardised written communication that are clear, simple language and shared terminology, in order to ensure that information is understandable to all employees.

Besides, psychological and emotional barriers also play a significant role in shaping workplace communication. Employees with high levels of stress, fear of negative judgement, low self-confidence, and unfavourable attitudes can limit voicing opinions, asking for clarification, or offering feedback. These eventually restricts collaboration and creativity (Bridger & Haslam, 2025; Omar & Ngui, 2024). While emotional pressure can also break trust within teams, as employees may choose to remain silent from sharing information to avoid criticism (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). When these psychological barriers are left unaddressed, organisations may experience poor transparency, low employee engagement, resulting in poor overall performance (Men, Yue, & Liu, 2020; Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017). Therefore, cultivating a psychologically supportive work environment is essential in promoting active participation among employees.

Organisational and hierarchical barriers also affect communication. Too many layers, unclear instructions, and limited feedback channels will eventually distort information. It slows down communication, create inefficiencies and increasing gap between the top management and staff (Bahrain, Sakrani & Maidin, 2023). Hierarchical barriers prevent employees from sharing issues or contributing ideas. In addition, inconsistent messages from managers that passed down too many layers can lead to confusion and errors. Furthermore, cultural and perceptual differences in diverse workforces also affect how messages are interpreted. Employees might understand the same message in different ways, resulting in misunderstandings and leading a conflict to happen. Hence, the human resource department need to promote cultural awareness to support clear and accurate communication regardless cultural diversity.

Despite the numerous previous studies on workplace communication, most studies either focus narrowly on one or two types of communication barriers or are broad conceptual reviews. Very few studies examine employees' perceptions of multiple barriers done in specific organisational context, especially among staff members of Kolej Komuniti Malaysia. This gap highlights the need for a study that can provide a detail information on employees perceive physical, language, psychological, organisational, and cultural barriers. Such research is important prior to developing effective strategies and interventions to improve communication effectiveness as well as organisational successfulness.

Research Methodology
This is a quantitative study that used online questionnaire distributed via *Google Form*. Items in the questionnaire were adapted from Bahrain, Sakrani, and Maidin (2023) in their study entitled *Communication Barriers in Work Environment: Understanding Impact and Challenges*. The samples were all 26 staff members of Kolej Komuniti Sandakan, including the management, lecturers, and administrative personnel. Convenience sampling was applied, as it allowed the researcher to access readily available participants. Descriptive analysis was then conducted to examine employees' perceptions of their workplace communication barriers, namely physical and environmental barriers, language and semantic barriers, psychological and emotional barriers, organizational and hierarchical barriers, as well as cultural and perceptual barriers. It also identied the main factors that disrupt effective information flow and communication among staff members. The analysis of this study used descriptive analysis to

assess the level of student agreement with the study items based on the mean score. The mean interpretation level was based on the scale used by Ngadiman et al. (2019), namely: 1.00–1.99 (Weak), 2.00–2.99 (Low), 3.00–3.99 (Moderate), and 4.00–5.00 (High).

Reasearch Findings

Respondent Background

As shown in Table 1, the respondents consist of various demographic profiles. 61.54% (N=16) of the respondents are lecturers, while another 19.3% (N=5) are in management and administrative positions respectively.

For the years of service, 65.38% (N=17) of the respondents have more than 10 years of working experience. This is followed by 19.23% (N=5) who have served for 4–6 years. Meanwhile, 11.54% (N=3) have served between 7–10 years, and 3.85% (N=1) have served between 0–3 years.

Table 1: Respondents' Background

Demographic Profile			Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Position	Management		5	19.23
	Lecturer		16	61.54
	Administration		5	19.23
		Total	26	100.0
Years of Service	0–3 years		1	3.85
	4–6 years		5	19.23
	7–10 years		3	11.54
	more than 10 years		17	65.38
		Total	26	100.0

Physical and Environmental Barriers

Table 2 shows that the highest mean for physical and environmental barriers is *'technical problems interfere with digital communication,'* which is 4.15. This is followed by *'insufficient appropriate communication tools constrain effective communication'* with a mean of 4.00. Next is *'unsuitable office layout disrupts the flow of communication'* at 3.96, followed by *'noise and distractions in the workplace hinder effective communication'* at 3.77, and *'the distance between units or offices makes information sharing difficult'* at 3.54. Overall, the mean for physical and environmental barriers is 3.88.

Table 2: Physical and Environmental Barriers

Item	Physical and Environmental Barriers	N	Mean
1.	Technical problems (e.g., poor internet connection) interfere with digital communication.	26	4.15
2.	Insufficient appropriate communication tools (e.g., devices or software) constrain effective communication.	26	4.00
3.	Unsuitable office layout disrupts the flow of communication.	26	3.96
4.	Noise and distractions in the workplace hinder effective communication.	26	3.77

5.	The distance between units or offices makes information sharing difficult.	26	3.54
	Overall Mean	**26**	**3.88**

Mean score indicator: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

Language and Semantic Barriers

Table 3 shows that the highest mean for language and semantic barriers is *'messages are sometimes unclear due to sentence structure or inappropriate word choice'* which is 3.27. This is followed by *'the use of technical terms or jargon causes confusion'* with a mean of 2.77. Next is *'written messages are sometimes misinterpreted'* at 2.69, followed by *'misunderstandings often occur due to language differences'* at 2.58, and *'I sometimes find it difficult to understand messages from other units.'* at 2.42. Overall, the mean for language and semantic barriers is 2.75, which is at a low level, which explains that the staff has no problems or fewer problems in terms of language and semantic barriers. Problems related to language barriers are minimal. In addition, issues of understanding meaning (semantics) also pose less difficulty.

Table 3: Language and Semantic Barriers

Item	Language and Semantic Barriers	N	Mean
1.	Messages are sometimes unclear due to sentence structure or inappropriate word choice.	26	3.27
2.	The use of technical terms or jargon causes confusion.	26	2.77
3.	Written messages (such as emails or memos) are sometimes misinterpreted.	26	2.69
4.	Misunderstandings often occur due to language differences.	26	2.58
5.	I sometimes find it difficult to understand messages from other units.	26	2.42
	Overall Mean	**26**	**2.75**

Mean score indicator: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

Psychological and Emotional Barriers

Table 4 shows that the highest mean for psychological and emotional barriers is *'work pressure or stress affects the way someone communicates'* and *'negative attitudes among colleagues hinder open communication'* which are 4.00. This is followed by *'personal conflicts affect the way we share information'* with a mean of 3.46. Next is *'I feel hesitant to express my opinion for fear of criticism'* and *'low self-confidence makes it difficult for me to speak up in meetings,'* *both are* at 2.96. Overall, the mean for psychological and emotional barriers is 3.48. This value indicates that the barriers are at a moderate level. This means that the staff faces some psychological and emotional difficulties, but they are not too serious.

Table 4: Psychological and Emotional Barriers

Item	Psychological and Emotional Barriers	N	Mean
1.	Work pressure or stress affects the way someone communicates.	26	4.00
2.	Negative attitudes among colleagues hinder open communication.	26	4.00
3.	Personal conflicts affect the way we share information.	26	3.46
4.	I feel hesitant to express my opinion for fear of criticism.	26	2.96
5.	Low self-confidence makes it difficult for me to speak up in meetings.	26	2.96
	Overall Mean	**26**	**3.48**

Mean score indicator: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

Organizational and Hierarchical Barriers

Table 5 shows that the highest mean for organizational and hierarchical barriers is *'messages often change when passed through many people'* which is 3.85. This is followed by *'too many layers of hierarchy slow down communication flow'* with a mean of 3.50. Next is *'supervisors/leaders do not always communicate clearly with staff'* and *'feedback from staff rarely reaches higher management'* both are at 2.85. Next is *'decisions are sometimes made without clear communication with employees'* at 2.81. Overall, the mean for psychological and emotional barriers is 3.17. This value indicates that the level of the barrier is moderate. This means that employees also face some psychological and emotional challenges, but they are not too significant.

Table 5: Organizational and Hierarchical Barriers

Item	Organizational and Hierarchical Barriers	N	Mean
1.	Messages often change when passed through many people.	26	3.85
2.	Too many layers of hierarchy slow down communication flow.	26	3.50
3.	Supervisors/leaders do not always communicate clearly with staff.	26	2.85
4.	Feedback from staff rarely reaches higher management.	26	2.85
5.	Decisions are sometimes made without clear communication with employees.	26	2.81
	Overall Mean	**26**	**3.17**

Mean score indicator: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

Cultural and Perceptual Barriers

Table 6 shows that the highest mean for cultural and perceptual barriers is *'misinterpretations occur because individuals understand messages in different ways'* which is 3.65. This is followed by *'some employees interpret messages differently based on personal perceptions'* with a mean of 3.58. Next is *'some individuals avoid expressing disagreement out of respect for authority'* at 3.50, followed by *'cultural norms influence an individual's level of openness in communication'* at 3.31, and *'differences in cultural backgrounds lead to misunderstandings in communication'* at 2.77. Overall, the mean for language and semantic barriers is 3.36. This value indicates that the level of barriers is moderate. This means that staff face some difficulties with language and understanding meaning, but it is also not too serious.

Table 6: Cultural and Perceptual Barriers

Item	Cultural and Perceptual Barriers	N	Mean
1.	Misinterpretations occur because individuals understand messages in different ways.	26	3.65
2.	Some employees interpret messages differently based on personal perceptions.	26	3.58
3.	Some individuals avoid expressing disagreement out of respect for authority.	26	3.50
4.	Cultural norms influence an individual's level of openness in communication.	26	3.31
5.	Differences in cultural backgrounds lead to misunderstandings in communication.	26	2.77
	Overall Mean	**26**	**3.36**

Mean score indicator: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings revealed that most staff agree that physical and environmental barriers gave a strong impact on communication, with technological problems in digital communication being the main challenge. The lack of suitable communication tools further limited employees' ability to share information effectively. In addition, most staff perceived that poor office layouts, noise, and distractions reduced interaction among them. Physical distance between units also increased information silos. This is parallel with previous study indicate the importance of having good digital infrastructure, suitable communication tools and practical workstation layouts can create a supportive environment that supported interaction, hence, enhance communication effectiveness (Sivunen & Laitinen, 2019; Aufegger et al., 2022; Chattergee et al., 2023).

Findings also disclosed that language and semantic barriers did influence communication. Most staff agree that messages were unclear due to ineffective sentence structure and inappropriate word choice. This is supported by previous study stated that such issues reduce message clarity and lead to misunderstandings, especially in written communication (Chattergee, Chauduri, Vrontis & Giovando, 2023). However, most staff perceived that language, and semantic barriers were generally not a major concern within the organisation. Similarly, language differences between units did not cause serious challenges. Staff reported few difficulties in understanding messages from other departments, reflecting an organisational environment where semantic clarity was maintained across teams. Overall, staff indicated that the organisation had effective language and semantic practices

In addition, findings indicated that psychological and emotional factors did influence communication within the organisation. Most staff perceived that stress and negative attitudes among colleagues were present, resulting in poor communication. These later affect staff's willingness to communicate openly. It is supported by previous study stated that workplace stress and interpersonal tensions could reduce transparency, collaboration, and information sharing (Bridger & Haslam, 2025). They also agree that personal conflicts affect communication, as it creates barriers to information exchange and reduce trust between colleagues (Qiao, Mahmood, Ahmad, Bashir & Bari, 2023). However, hesitancy to express opinions due to fear of criticism and low self-confidence was less of a concern, suggesting that employees generally felt comfortable participating in discussions and contributing ideas.

Overall, staff agree that psychological and emotional factors played a role in poor communication.

Organisational and hierarchical barriers also give some impact to communication, Staff agree that messages were passed through multiple people, as well as multiple layers of hierarchy slowed down the flow of information. These barriers lead to message distortion and delays, which were consistent with prior research highlighting the challenges of complex organisational structures on effective communication (Chattergee, Chauduri, Vrontis & Giovando, 2023). In contrast, areas such as clarity from supervisors, upward feedback reaching management, and communication during decision-making were generally fine. Overall, staff perceived that organisational and hierarchical processes caused delays or changes in messaging, causing information is vaguely transferred across levels.

Finally, the findings indicated that cultural and perceptual factors had a moderate influence on communication. Most staff agree that some individuals interpreted messages differently based on personal perceptions or prior experiences. Such differences lead to misinterpretations, as highlighted in previous study stated that diverse cognitive frameworks and perceptual lenses affected understanding in organisational settings (Dhanush, Shrisha & Samira, 2025). Staff also agree that they refrained from expressing disagreement out of respect for authority and cultural norms could shape openness in communication. These factors appear to significantly hinder overall information exchange. In contrast, differences in cultural backgrounds occasionally led to misunderstandings.

The findings recommended several initiatives that should be taken by the top management in order to promote effective communication. They must provide reliable digital tools and practically designed workspaces that reduce noise, distractions, and distance between units. Frequent online meeting can reduce gaps between units as well as promoting collaboration. Communication must use clear and simple language, avoiding jargon and complex sentences. For example, standardising e-mail templates or internal memos (Chattergee, Chauduri, Vrontis & Giovando, 2023). Management must create a psychologically safe environment where employees can share ideas, provide feedback, and resolve conflicts, such as organizing regular open-feedback sessions or team check-ins (Qiao, Mahmood, Ahmad, Bashir & Bari, 2023). Stress management programme and team building are effective ways to help improve relationships, reduce negative attitudes, and resolve personal conflicts among colleagues. To promote proper messages passing through layers of hierarchy, organisation should implement a centralised information platform where updates reach all staff (Keyton, Caputo, Ford, Fu, Leibowitz, Liu, & Wu 2013). Finally, organisations can organize a training on cultural awareness to help staff understand different communication styles and perspectives. (Dhanush, Shrisha & Samira, 2025). Together, these actions will strengthen communication and enhance overall organisational performance.

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