

What is a Communication Audit?

A communication audit is a systematic review and evaluation of communication within an organisation. It tests out the efficiency, reliability and penetration of existing communication flows (vertical, upwards and lateral). It seeks to establish where blockages occur and recommends improvements to the system. It seeks to confirm existing good practice. It is vital that staff feel involved in the audit process, that it should not be something which is done to them and the results of which they are never told. Staff should have ownership as much as possible of this audit and of the problems and successes that it identifies. If there is ownership then staff are much more likely to implement necessary changes. An audit should not be a one-off, simple snapshot of the organisation, but an on-going process that can be refined and repeated at organisational, departmental or small unit level.

External consultants can be used to run the whole audit. The advantages are that staff time is cut to a minimum and the process may be more objective in its approach. However, staff ownership may be reduced. At the other extreme is the *in-house audit*. This may prove expensive in staff time and there may be a lack of the necessary expertise and willingness to mount such an operation. There may be a lack of confidentiality where staff are known to each other. There is a mid-way position in that external consultants work with a shadow team from the organisation who will gain experience at carrying out the audit and assisting in much of the work. This process has the advantage that there will be, in the organisation, a group who will be in the position to carry out other audits and train those wishing to investigate small scale problems.

Some Typical Methods...

- Observation of existing practices: meetings, team briefings, etc
- Review of existing paper flows: memos, internal mail, phone systems.
- Observation by walking about: talking to staff informally, meeting them in canteens, off-duty moments, taking note of noticeboards, codes of practice, information leaflets to new staff etc.
- Random sample of staff from right across the organisation: questionnaires and interviews
- Forums: groups of staff meeting informally with observers.
- Surgeries: observers being in a place at a stated time for staff to visit and speak their minds, etc.

Your Options

Option I

The consultants undertake the audit on behalf of the Unit or Board and report findings along with recommendations for action. Although audits vary in scale and scope, the basic process will be as follows, subject to negotiation with the client.

Option II

As audits should be 'repeated regularly', clients may prefer to identify and develop a member or members of staff who could, in the long run, carry out such audits. This option offers the communication audit as outlined in Option I, but with the addition of the client's member of staff working alongside our consultants. He or she would be involved in the whole process and thus would be 'trained' to carry out such audits in the future according to an agreed package.

Option III

The client may have staff who already have some competence in carrying out surveys etc. This option involves the consultants directly training and further developing such skills to the point where these staff (with others) can carry out audits for themselves.

In this option, the role of consultants would be as trainers of the client's own staff in the carrying out of an audit. The consultant would also, in this option, provide a monitoring and evaluation service on behalf of the client.

As will be seen from the above choices, our consultants are flexible in the kinds of service they provide. The present and future needs of the client will be of paramount importance.

The Process of an Audit

1. Sending out the proposal
2. Negotiation around that proposal in terms of detailed costs, dates, etc.
3. Visit by Communicate consultants to site(s) to meet management. Discussion with Administration as to logistics of issue of questionnaire and interviews with sample staff.
4. One full day's observation by consultants to get the feel of the situation and the layout of the premises.
5. Issue of questionnaire.
6. Interviews with sample of staff. Allow 15-18 interviews per day per interviewer.
7. Collection of questionnaires. Analysis.
8. Writing up report.
9. Presentation of report – oral briefing by consultants (also putting together a summary report for distribution to staff).

