

Informal Communication Conversations as a Form of Organizational Communication

Minna Nylander

Research assistant

Helsinki University of Technology

Firstname.lastname@tkk.fi

Keywords— Organizational communication, informal communication, change communication.

Abstract. The objective of this paper is to think over the informal communication conversations as a form of organizational communication. The starting point was the implementation of the new salary system and the change situation in Helsinki University of Technology in spring 2005.

The implementation of a new salary system is, as any other state of change, complicated for organizations. The impact of change communication is usually extensive – one way or other. Usually change spawns confusion, anger and skepticism. There is a plethora of data and studies discussing the role of informal communication in effective collaboration. Informal communication builds relationships among employees and employers, and face-to-face interaction is the primary way people communicate informally.

This paper is based on same data as a report “Opportunities and challenges of the new salary system at Helsinki University of Technology. Personnel’s perceptions and opinions about the preparation of the new salary system in spring 2005”.

The study covered a sample of different employee groups from Helsinki University of Technology. Open-ended questions in a survey were analyzed by creating “theme groups” and naming them. In this paper we take a closer look to the so called coffee table conversations-group. Coffee table-group includes three types of thinking. The first type is “my opinion”, the second type is “other people’s opinions” and the third type is “our shared opinion”.

1 INTRODUCTION

Helsinki University of Technology is preparing to transfer to a new salary system during the current year. The new salary system is based on the requirements of the job and the performance of the employee whereas the old system was based on salary grades and increments. Helsinki University of Technology is not alone in this reform; all Finnish universities are preparing for this change.

This paper describes some reasons (and questions) for why the respondents had such inconsistent feelings about organizational communication, cultural change and the new salary system. In this paper the main purpose is to analyze the perception of knowledge on the organizational change situation.

2 ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The New salary system and the state of change in Helsinki University of Technology arise basically from the Finnish society and the public sector’s needs for change. So, thus there is more extensive background for salary system change than just organization personal needs the basic elements are quite same as in the basic textbooks about organizational communication. In this chapter I discuss about organization, communication and change. The implementation of a new salary system is, as any other state of change, complicated for organizations. Literature usually talks about change communication. The impact of change communication is usually extensive – one way or other. Usually change spawns confusion, anger and skepticism, argues D’Aprix [1] and continues that it requires a powerful rationale to help people understand why they must embrace the change. Basically in change situations the supervisors are in key position and it doesn’t matter how well all the professional communicators do their jobs, if the employer and supervisors won’t commit to the organizational change.

2.1 Organizational communication.

The definitions about the organizational communication have changed many times during history. Two primary communication systems are internal and external organizational communication channels, argues Kreps [2]. A primary organizational function of internal communication is to enable formal task development, coordination, and accomplishment. According to Kreps, external organizational communication must be communication among organizations to bring about interorganizational coordination. External communication channels are used to enable organization members to interact with individuals outside the organization. Those channels carry messages between the organization and the organization’s relevant environment. Messages are both

sent to and received from the organization's relevant environment [2].

Communication is an umbrella² for everything that happens in organization and in the past decade this thought has come more and more prevalent over the field of study says Åberg [3]. However, in the daily life ways of thinking about communication is still a bit mechanistic and only a concrete part of the organization. It is still confusing for people to understand the totality of communication. Umbrella-thinking is not obvious. Lehtonen [4] argues that, while the technology advances, people may have forgotten to work for decent organizational communication. New technology enabled fast and multiform communication for everyone with fair investments. Lehtonen [4] is concerned that employees would consider that just a mechanical communication via email or internet is "real" communication and with this new technology the professional communicators won't be necessary any more. However, at the same time Lehtonen [4] argues that organizations need much more professionals to take care of the huge flood of information. As Choo [5] notices, organizations are inundated with information, but find it difficult to interpret and act on the flood of information. Organizations are information-rich but interpretation-poor systems awash with raw information which must be channeled and converted into organizational intelligence. Åberg [3] has clarified the idea of organizational communication and made a simple list of the five most important functions of communication. Åberg argues that work community can effect directly four of those functions. Only the last one, social interaction -function is not directly under the organization's control. Those functions are:

1. Communication is an anchor for the organization's basic operations

This is the most important way of communicating in the organization. If the operational communication won't work, even a good internal communication or pr won't replace it. Juholin [6] has argued that this first function is not far away from management, but the point of view is just different.

2. Work community profiling

Communication is a necessary function for long-span development. Organization needs communication to create hoped-for reputation.

The second function, *profiling* is more and more important for organizations. Taking care of the brands and reputations are nowadays part of the strategies.

3. Engagement

Communication is a basic element for employees for at have a clear expectations from/ of organization and for at commit to the work.

The third function is a difficult idea. Basically we read that function as an expectation for a decent work environment with a fair criteria for working and for fair

relationships between employees and employer³.

4. Information

Mechanical or technical, "neutral" information is highly important for and between employees, employers and partners.

The fourth function means fair and neutral communication for partners and for work environment.

5. Social interaction

We just need each other in daily life. We have our basic social needs and a work community is one of the most important places to have those connections. The fifth function includes so many different kinds of aspects that I should discuss it in the next chapter. This function includes for example the idea of the coffee table conversations.

2.2 Under the umbrella; informal communication in organization

There is a plethora of data and studies discussing the role of informal communication in effective collaboration. Informal communication builds relationships among employees and employers, and face-to-face interaction is the primary way people communicate informally argues Narni et al. [7]. Informal communication has a big role in organizational communication. Informal communication is one part of the Åberg's fifth function which means that it's a part of the social interaction-function. This function is also the only function which is not precisely under the organization's straight control.

Juholin [8] argues, that informal communication (e.g. coffee table conversations and gossiping on the hallway) have quite negative reputation in organizations. On the other hand everybody knows how important way of communicating that phenomenon is. It's important because it develops common understanding and meaning of knowledge. Juholin reminds us that workmates are in big role what comes to new information and change communication.

Sometimes the critics are right about the ineffectiveness of the informal communication, but we have to also remember, that usually the information in that informal forum is basically correct, but it just doesn't come from a formal source (or formal style of speaking). In past few years the researchers in communication studies have had started to realize the good power of informal communication [6].

2.3 The change communication

The change communication is basically part of a normal organizational communication, thus, nowadays people usually perceive it as an independent part of the communication studies and practices. The thoroughgoing difference between daily communication and change communication arises from comparing change communication the daily organizational communication.

² Our definition is bit different from Elisa Juholin's [6] definition. She argues that neutral term; information *is umbrella for* internal and external organizational communication.

³ The idea of engagement is of course much more than just committing to the work, but here and now, let's keep it simple.

Change communication's most important role is at the same time both to explain and to direct the change. It's also important to realize the difference in communication when comparing crisis situations and change situations. They are not the same [8]. Compared to crisis communication, change communication aims to explain and create knowledge of a new or a confusing situation. One important part when explaining the change is to figure out how the personnel in organization relate to change. For example, do they have a slant on this subject? Or what kind of information workers are expecting from the managers? Is the change basically a problem or is it for the good of the workplace?

According to Juholin, usually the reactions in a change situation depend of the organization's culture. She discusses that a very abiding organization culture is more unwilling to change, than an organization which is in continuous change. Schein [9] (1999) lets us assume that all adult learning starts with "disconfirmation" and that "disconfirmation" creates the challenges also for the change communication.

2.4 D'Aprix model of change

D'Aprix [1] argues that there are various stages in employees' responds to change. First stage is shock and disbelief, and according to D'Aprix; there are three questions in the mind of the employees at that point: How serious are the threats to our organization? How did this happen? Who is to blame? D'Aprix's point is that this is an initial step in the process of communicating change, because people are trying to understand the personal implications of what has happened.

The second stage follows the first one also in a hierarchical order. In the second stage employees have adapted to the change, but often the main question on the minds of the employees is: do we have a plan of action? And if so, what is it? According to D'Aprix, the most frightening suspicion for any employee group is that there is no "battle strategy", that the "war" will be only a series of firefights in witch people will be picked off one by one as the generals try to concoct a strategy on the spot [1].

The third stage is, according to D'Aprix, characterized by the natural human desire to want to solve the problem. Its hallmarks are the questions about what do you want me to do? And how can I help? According to D'Aprix, when people reach stage three, it's necessary that someone's able to answer their question or they are likely to be demoralized by their helplessness [1].

Today most of the researchers also recognize the connection between for example a job satisfaction and communication satisfaction [6]. A well-functioning organizational communication system contributes to job satisfaction and satisfied employees are usually satisfied also with the organizational communication.

According to Juuti [10], there are at least three dimensions which interact with job satisfaction. First are the job's contents and opportunities, second deals with pay

satisfaction and finally, the third covers the implications of the work environment.

Juuti [10] believes, that job satisfaction is made of sincere, "open-door" organizational culture, confidential (not a cagey one!) and respectful atmosphere with a comfortable and peaceful work environment. He also accentuates, that the roles of the supervisors and managers are important in many ways, for example they should follow the idea of open communication.

2.5 Earlier research on the subject.

This paper based on same data as a report "Opportunities and challenges of the new salary system at Helsinki University of Technology. Personnel's perceptions and opinions about the preparation of the new salary system in spring 2005" [11].

In the report; the respondents evaluated their superiors positively when opinions about the old system were asked for. However, the old system was not considered to correspond to the employees' skills and competences. So far, the most important experiences from the preceding spring were the performance reviews with the superiors. This is because job descriptions and priorities were discussed and clarified.

Employees felt that there was not enough information available about the new salary system.

The job evaluation criteria were well-known. To the contrary, the criteria for the evaluation of the work achievements or the employees' expertise were not yet perceived as well defined. As a result, the next step would be to set specific and common terms and to prepare evaluation tools for the performance reviews.

Some of the respondents considered that one of the greatest challenges with the new salary system is to find the balance between the common norms and the use of the system as a management tool by superiors of the units and groups. The new salary system was considered more flexible. It was seen to support results-oriented management and also better to reward successful work performance compared to the old system. However, the respondents considered the new salary system neither more competitive nor better supporting the strategy and goals of the University than the old system. The respondents also believed that the new salary system is too complicated and will cause conflicts among the employees.

The schedule for the preparation during spring 2005 was experienced as too tight. According to the respondents, the opinions of the different parties were not paid enough attention to. In addition, different concerns about the future of the Helsinki University of Technology were reflected in the responses.

Summa summarum. The objective of this paper is to think over the informal communication conversations as a form of organizational communication. The starting point was the implementation of the new salary system and the change situation in Helsinki University of Technology in spring 2005.

The study covered a sample of different employee groups from Helsinki University of Technology. We invited 267 employees around Helsinki University of Technology to participate in the survey. A survey was sent via email in the summer of 2005. Invitations briefly explained the study's purpose, guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, and included a hypertext link to the survey. Survey took approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete. Survey was created with Surveyor -program and the data analysis made with SPSS for Windows 12 -program and qualitative method. The reply rate was finally nearly 40 % (103 respondents). Survey includes nearly 20 pages of claims (like Pay Satisfaction Questionnaires from Heneman and Schwab or Distributive Justice Index -questions from Price and Mueller). In this paper it's needless to open the questionnaire sheet more than this.

Questionnaire sheet includes four open-ended questions, which were analyzed. The focus of this paper is to figure out the respondent's ways to talk about the new salary system in spring 2005.

3.1 Open-ended questions in survey

The respondents' lettered answers were analyzed by creating theme groups and naming them. In this paper I will describe and analyze one of the theme groups.

The lettered answers to the question "*what kind of surprising, funny or even annoying debates about the new salary system have you had?*" were analyzed for this paper. I named that group as a coffee table -group. There were 46 answers to that question.

According to Silverman [12]; there are four major methods used by qualitative researchers: observation, analyzing texts and documents, interviews and recording and transcribing. Our survey lends from qualitative research to quantitative research so called "open-ended questions" [12].

So, the analyzing method (in "open-ended question") was borrowed from the qualitative side. This made sense, because the idea of open-ended questions was to analyze respondents' answers as open-mindedly as possible. Of course this method is quite arbitrary, but the point of this kind of research method is to read through the answers several times with open mind and then sort those answers with her/his conscience. Critical thinkers might say that the results are just one construction about the truth, and of course it is so, but like Eskola, Suoranta [13] and Vallin [14] remind us, qualitative research is always tied to the culture of the researcher and it's always just a one side of the truth.

As I mentioned, there were 46 answers for the paper's main question (all data N= 103), but only 31 of those 46 answers were available for statistical analysis. To illustrate more the respondent's feelings, I also used statistical analysis alongside the qualitative analysis and that's why the number of respondents change in pictures 1 and 2.

The reason why the answers were so interesting in the first place was the finding that respondents didn't really answer straight to the question "*what kind of surprising, funny or even annoying debates about the new salary system have you had?*"

Normally this could be a huge problem, e.g. if the respondents answer incorrectly or "wrongly" to the question in questionnaire form, but at this time it was just a good "misunderstanding" between the question and respondents. That question made a really interesting data.

So the respondents didn't answer to the question, on the contrary, they rewrote the question and wrote about *how they assume that other people think/feel about new salary system and the change situation and how that fictional "public opinion" fits with their own state of mind*. They basically created their own version about the other workmates' opinions in the change situation. Well, there's nothing new about that, people do it all the time, but it is an interesting phenomenon. Basically the data includes three different types of thoughts on the subject. Henceforth, I will call those three types as a coffee table-group.

Coffee table-group includes three types of thinking. The first type is "my opinion", the second type is "other people's opinions" and the third type is "our shared opinion". The classification shows us which kind of respondents dare to say they opinion about the new salary system, work in the organization and other important things, and why they dare. And why other won't. However, as I mentioned earlier, from now on we have to remember that the data wasn't large, so the divisions into the three types are not statistically comparable and generalization is not recommended.

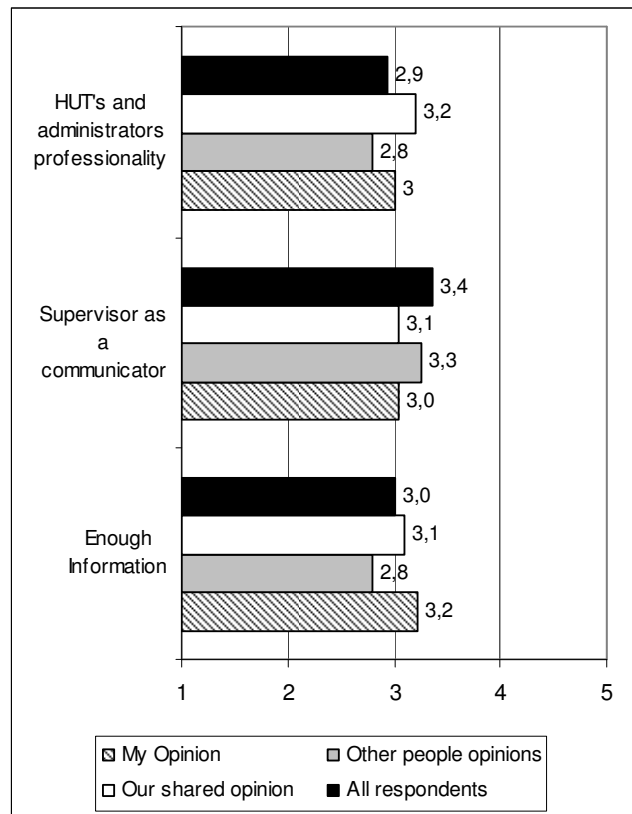
The types inside the coffee table-group spread out very uniformly. The "my opinion"- type includes 11 identified respondents, the "other people's opinions"-type had 10 respondents and finally the last one, "our shared opinion"-type had 10 respondents.

The "my opinion"-type includes respondents who knew what they wanted and how they could get it. "My opinion" - respondents were quite sure that they had correct information and knowledge about new salary system. They told their opinion as their own and without any hesitation. The point in this type was the respondent self-awareness. Even when the respondent's writing was as a question, the question was some kind of own thinking and/or written with sarcasm, like this example: "*The funniest thing is that when the administrative department (of the Helsinki University of Technology) advanced the new salary system, they froze all other employees' bonus, except their own.*" The second example continues with the same sarcastic way as the first ones: "*the main point of the new salary system is to assign even more paperwork for the Universities bureaucrats?*"

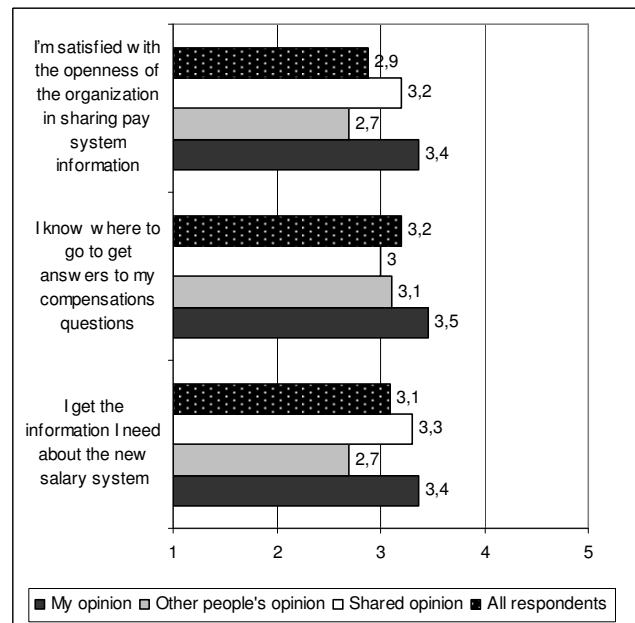
The “other people’s opinion”-type consist of the respondents who felt more hesitant about their own opinions on the new salary system and the professional skills of the administration during the spring than the other two types. “Other people’s opinion” -respondents usually wrote more often assumptions about people’s ways to think. They didn’t write “as themselves” as often as the two other types did. Like this respondent wrote: *“I have heard that in some department, the supervisors had said to an employee in the middle of the performance review that his job is totally useless and won’t need brains at al. Motivation can’t be good after that.”*

The “our shared opinion”-type. In this type of the coffee table-group the respondents didn’t really speak of they own. Instead, they had had conversations with other workmates, so the dominating opinion accumulated from their own and their workmates’ beliefs. Like this respondent wrote: *“Mainly discussions about how unfair the new salary system is for old employees, new employees be allowed to the same salary as the old on, but old employees had collected that salary during many years.”*

Coffee table-group and believes about the managers’ and employer’s professional skills in change situation and about change communication. Picture 1 shows that “my opinion” -type and “our shared opinion”-type appreciated professional skills of administration more than “other people’s opinion”-type. “Other people’s opinion” -type respected more their supervisors as professional communicators than the other two types. “My opinion”-type and “our shared opinion”-types believe more than “other people opinion” -type, when told that they had enough information about the new salary system and the change situation. The finding made sense, assumed the people who have had some kind of coffee table and hallway conversations with workmates, have also mused over the new salary system, probably more actively than other. “All respondents” feel in “professional question” almost same (2,9) as “other people opinion”-type (2,8), they also trusted most the supervisors as communicators, but were neutral about the sufficiency of information.



Picture 1. Coffee table-group’s (N=31) and all respondents (N=103) beliefs about professional skills of the (Helsinki University of Technology) administrators in the change situation, how supervisors managed in their role as a communicators and thoughts about whether there was enough information during springtime 2005. (1=very unsatisfied, 3=neutral, 5= very satisfied, N= 31.)



Picture 2. Coffee table-group’s (N=31) and all respondents (N=103) beliefs about information and how to get it. (1=very unsatisfied, 3=neutral, 5= very satisfied, N= 31 and 103).

As we can see in picture 2, there are differences between the three types in the coffee table group. In the picture 2 you will find two questions behind the “enough information” -sum (picture 1). Those questions are the second and the third claims in the picture 2. As we find, the “other people’s opinion” -type was less satisfied with the organizations openness than other types, and you can find the same phenomena also from the last claim (*I get the information I need*). “*I know where to go to get answers to my compensation questions*”- claim shows that “my opinion” -type knows better than any other types where to ask for extra information about the new salary system.

5 CONCLUSION

In this paper I have introduced the so called coffee table -types. The idea of categorization was based on informal communication. As I mentioned earlier, informal communication is one part of the Åberg’s fifth function which means that it’s a part of the social interaction-function. This function is also the only function which is not precisely under the organization’s straight control. Coffee table -categorization was made by using qualitative analysis. The original data was a survey study as a questionnaire, but it included also written answers. The problem of the coffee table conversation’s analysis was the quite small amount of data. As I wrote earlier in this paper, the divisions into the three types are not statistically comparable and generalization is not recommended (in statistical sense). Although it cannot be unequivocally stated in this paper that informal communication (like hallway conversations or lunch break speculation) made (statistical) difference in the common knowledge of the new salary system, it still gives us something to think about in qualitative way. Also the earlier studies and theories have described and thought about the same questions.

The coffee table group includes three types of respondent’s answers. There was the “my opinion” -type, which included respondents who wrote their answers as themselves. Those respondents were pretty sure about their knowledge of the new salary system. Of course the knowledge wasn’t necessarily “right information” from organization’s formal communication point of view, but it was meaningful for the people and created common understanding about the new salary system and the change situation.

The second type was “other people’s opinion”-type, were respondents commented on informal communication and the hallway conversations with words like “I have heard that...”

In the “other people’s opinion”-type the respondents didn’t really speak of they own, but they had had conversations with other workmates, so the dominating opinion accumulates from their own and their workmates’ beliefs. I think those respondents had split at least to two different kinds of respondent type; there were those who had enough information, but wouldn’t/couldn’t really show it. Then there were that respondent who really didn’t have enough information about the new salary system and that’s why they didn’t comment on themselves. Of course there are a

number of reasons why people react like they react and this is just my interpretation of the answers.

The last division, the “our shared opinion” -type was, in my view, also the most interesting type. It might be speculated that “our shared opinion”-respondents showed that the informal conversations might have helped people to get the picture of the change situation. This might be so because they wondered together what was going on in the organization and they created a common or “shared” opinion about the change and the new salary system. In my view, that kind of groups were active and also curious. I think that the main result of coffee table conversations is that informal communication, conversations in hallways or at lunch break created the knowledge. So gossiping might be for good!

REFERENCES

- [1] D’Aprix, Roger (1996). *Communicating for Change. Connecting the Workplace with the Marketplace*. San Fransisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers. p.3
- [2] Kreps, Gary L. (1990). *Organizational communication*. Second Edition. New York & London, Longman, a division of Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.,Inc. p.20
- [3] Åberg, Leif (2000). *Viestinnän johtaminen*. Keuruu, Otavan kirjapaino Oy. (Communication management) p.90
- [4] Lehtonen, Jaakko (2000). *Toimiva viestintä*. Yrityksen aineetonta pääomaa. Teoksessa Aula, Pekka & Hakala, Salli (toim.). *Kolmet kasvot. Näkökulmia organisaatioviestintään*. Helsinki, Loki-Kirjat. (Workable communication. Company’s immaterial capital in book; Three faces. Viewpoints to the organizational communication)
- [5] Choo, Chun Wei (1998). *The Knowing Organization. How Organizations Use Information to Construct Meaning, Create Knowledge, and Make Decisions*. New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- [6] Juholin, Elisa (2002). *Communicare! Viestintä strategista käytäntöön*. Hämeenlinna, Karisto oy. (Communicare! From strategy to practice)
- [7] Nardi Bonnie, Whittaker Steve and Bradner Erin: ["Interaction and Outeraction: Instant Messaging in Action: An Ethnographic Study of Instant Messaging in the Workplace"](#)
In Proceedings Conference of Computer-supported Cooperative Work. 2000. ACM. Pp. 79-88.
(<http://www.unites.org/html/resource/im/im4.htm> 20.6.2006)
- [8] Juholin, Elisa (1999). *Sisäinen viestintä*. Juva, WSOY. (Internal communication)
- [9] Schein, Edgar H. (2001). *Yrityskulttuuri – selviytymisopas*. Tietoja ja luuloja kulttuurimuutoksesta. Suom. Päivi Rosti. Tampere, Tammer-Paino. (The corporate culture survival guide -sense and nonsense about culture change 1999, Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers)
- [10] Juuti, Pauli (1992). *Organisaatiokäyttäytyminen*. Aavaranta-sarja. Keuruu, Otavan painolaitokset (Organizational behavior)
- [11] Salimäki, Aino & Nylander, Minna (2005). *Uuden palkkausjärjestelmän mahdollisuudet ja haasteet*. Henkilöstön kokemuksia ja näkemyksiä käyttöönoton valmistelusta keväällä 2005. (<http://hel.tkk.fi/fi/upj/UPJraportti020106.pdf>) Espoo, Monikko oy. (Opportunities and challenges of the new salary system at Helsinki University of Technology. Personnel’s perceptions and opinions about the preparation of the new salary system in spring 2005)
- [12] Silverman, David (1994) *Interpreting qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*. London, Sage publications.
- [13] Eskola Jari & Suoranta, Juha (1999). *Johdatus laadulliseen tutkimukseen*. Jyväskylä, Gummeruksen kirjapaino.
- [14] Vallin, Raine (2001) *Johdatus tilastolliseen tutkimukseen*. Jyväskylä, PS-kustannus. Gummeruksen kirjapaino Oy. (Introduction to quantitative data analysis)



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Informal Communication Conversations as a Form of Organizational Communication

31.8.2006

European Productivity Conference

Minna Nylander

Research assistant

Research Program of Rewarding

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Introduction

- Presentation is a part of the Pro gradu –thesis “New salary system and change communication, case Helsinki University of Technology”
- This presentation and pro gradu -thesis are based on same data as a report “Opportunities and challenges of the new salary system at Helsinki University of Technology. Personnel’s perceptions and opinions about the preparation of the new salary system in spring 2005” (Salimäki and Nylander, 1/2006)
- The starting point of the study was the implementation of the new salary system and the change situation in Helsinki University of Technology

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Earlier results on the subject (Salimäki and Nylander report):

- Employees felt that there was not enough information available about the new salary system
- Respondents also believed that the new salary system is too complicated and will cause conflicts among the employees
- The schedule for the preparation during spring 2005 was experienced as too tight.
- According to the respondents, the opinions of the different parties were not paid enough attention to.
- In addition, different concerns about the future of the Helsinki University of Technology were reflected in the responses.

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Method

- The study covered a sample of different employee groups from HUT
- The reply rate was finally nearly 40 % (103 respondents)
- Survey includes nearly 20 pages of claims and four open-ended questions
- The focus of this presentation is to figure out the respondent's ways to talk about the new salary system, and open-ended question "**what kind of surprising, funny or even annoying debates about the new salary system have you had?**" were analyzed for this presentation
- There were 46 answers to that question

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Theoretical background

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

“Communication is an umbrella for everything that happens in organization”

Under the umbrella; Åberg's 5 functions of organizational communication:

1. **Communication is an anchor for the organization's basic operations**
2. **Work community profiling** –communication is a necessary function for long-span development
3. **Engagement** –communication is a basic element for employees for at have a clear expectations from/of organization and for at commit to the work
4. **Information** – mechanical or technical “neutral” information is highly important for and between employees, employers and partners
5. **Social interaction**

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Under the umbrella; Åberg's fifth function and Informal Communication in organization

- This social interaction function is the only function which is not precisely under the organization's straight control
- Function includes the idea of informal communication which create relationships among employees and employers
- The primary form of informal communication is face-to-face interaction (but also email and web-base-discussions are important ways nowadays)
- Juholin argues, that informal communication have quite negative reputation in organizations, but on the other hand everybody knows how important way of communicating that phenomenon is
- According to Juholin; workmates are in big role what comes to effectiveness of the new information and change communication

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Results

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Results – Coffee table group and the feelings of change

- The lettered answers to the question "*what kind of surprising, funny or even annoying debates about the new salary system have you had?*" were analyzed for this presentation.
- I named that group as a coffee table –group, because I assume that most of the informal communication conversations begins during the lunch time or coffee breaks...
- The reason why the answers were so interesting in the first place was the finding that respondents didn't really answer straight to that question.
- On the contrary, they rewrote the question and wrote about *how they feel or how they assume that other people think/feel about new salary system and the change situation* and also *how that fictional "public opinion" fits with their own state of mind*.
- They basically created their own version about the other workmates' opinions in the change situation.

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Results - Coffee table group and the feelings of change

- Inside the coffee table –group I found three types of thinking and reactions to the question asked
- The first type was "my opinion" –respondent's,
- The second type was "other people's opinions" – respondent's and
- The third type was "our shared opinion" –respondent's

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

My opinion -type

- The “my opinion” -type includes respondents who knew what they wanted and how they could get it. “My opinion” -respondents were quite sure that they had correct information and knowledge about new salary system. They told their opinion as their own and without any hesitation. The point in this type was the respondent self-awareness
- On the other hand they were quite sarcastic and they were little bit blasé about the new salary system...
- *“The funniest thing is that when the administrative department (of the Helsinki University of Technology) advanced the new salary system, they froze all other employees’ bonus, except their own.”*

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Other people’s opinion

- The “other people’s opinion”-type consist of the respondents who felt more hesitant about their own opinions on the new salary system and the professional skills of the administration during the spring than the other two types.
- “Other people’s opinion” -respondents usually wrote more often assumptions about people’s ways to think. They didn’t write “as themselves” as often as the two other types did.
- *“I have heard that in some department, the supervisors had said to an employee in the middle of the performance review that his job is totally useless and won’t need brains at al. Motivation can’t be good after that.”*

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Our shared opinion

- The "our shared opinion"-respondents didn't really speak of they own. Instead, they had had conversations with other workmates, so the dominating opinion accumulated from their own and their workmates' beliefs.
- Type includes both positive and critical conversations
- *"Mainly discussions about how unfair the new salary system is for old employees, new employees be allowed to the same salary as the old on, but old employees had collected that salary during many years."*

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Conclusion

Informal communication conversations as a form of organizational communication

Challenges?

- Sometimes the critics are right about the ineffectiveness of the informal communication conversations. Sometimes discussions in lunchtime or in hallways don't create any knowledge in good way at all; only disinformation
- On the other hand, We have to also remember, that often the information in that informal forum is basically correct, **if** the operational and internal communication in the organization works decent...
- "My opinion" –type respondent's could have very strong opinion's, but how to make sure that those opinion's are based on the organizational information?
- Propably this is one reason, why informal communication have quite negative reputation in organizations?

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Conclusion

Informal communication conversations as a form of
organizational communication

Good things?

- In the past few years the researchers in communication studies have had started to realize the good power of informal communication
- Informal communication can develops common understanding and meaning of subject
- Our shared opinion –respondent's showed the good effects of the informal conversations

- Gossiping might be for good!

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Thank You!



31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi



Helsinki
University of
Technology

Laboratory
of Work
Psychology and
Leadership

Research
Program of
Rewarding
since 1996

Minna Nylander
Research assistant
Helsinki University of Technology
firstname.lastname@tkk.fi

(University of Helsinki
Faculty of Social Science
Department of Communication)

31/08/2006

www.palkitseminen.tkk.fi