

Introduction to Conducting Communication Audits

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The typical purpose of a communication audit is to analyze internal communication practices, processes, and/or attitudes, focusing on one or more groups within an organization (or the entire organization if it is of manageable size).

In order to make the audit useful as well as manageable, you may limit its scope in one of two ways:

- a) By focusing on a relatively small group, but analysing communication processes within the group in a fairly comprehensive way;
- b) By focusing on a fairly large group, but limiting the number of issues assessed and the number of people included in interviews or focus groups.

A General Communication Audit Plan

Usually, your assessment should include a combination of qualitative methods (e.g., interviews and focus groups) and quantitative methods (i.e., survey). A good general plan for conducting a communication audit the first time follows. While every situation is different, this plan provides at least a starting point for planning your audit.

1. Read key sources to get an overview of the communication audit process, especially Cal Downs' book Communication Audits and the appropriate chapters in Gerald Goldhaber's book Organizational Communication.
2. Clarify and contract for the primary goals of the project, including what questions you will attempt to answer, what will be done with the results of the audit, and who will have access to the results.
3. Apply for approval from the university's research ethics committee, following their established guidelines.
4. Introduce the audit process to participants.
5. Conduct qualitative research initially—e.g., focus groups or interviews—with a primary goal of assessing participants' perceptions of what the important issues and problems are.
 - Summarize answers to each interview/FG question to identify major themes
6. Develop or choose a survey instrument that fits the purposes of the audit and reflects the concerns surfaced in the initial focus groups/interviews. This stage is a particularly important one for getting feedback from your supervisor, since developing good survey instruments requires extensive experience.
7. Pilot test the survey instrument on 2-4 people. That is, let them complete the instrument and discuss with them any parts that were confusing. Then, refine the instrument.
8. Conduct the survey and analyze results, especially focusing on answers to your major questions. Summarize key findings.
9. Conduct more focus groups/interviews, with a primary goal of clarifying and refining your interpretations of survey findings. You are essentially testing and refining your major audit conclusions at this point.
10. Write up the final report.
11. Organize one or more meetings to discuss the results with members of the organization. The most useful discussions will be guided by Schein's process consultation model. That is, rather than making specific recommendations to the organization, present your interpretations in a tentative way, encouraging them to draw their own interpretations and develop their own action plans.

Key Sections of the Final Report

1. Literature review should summarize literature on communication audits as well as key communication processes on which you will focus.
2. Methods: describe your procedures in detail, so that someone else could replicate your study.
3. Results/discussion
 - a. Summarize findings, usually around major issues (e.g., the main sections of the survey); integrate the qualitative and quantitative data (vs. summarizing interviews, then surveys, etc.)
 - b. Draw on theory and research in interpreting and discussing key findings
 - c. Summarize most important findings, e.g., major strengths and weaknesses identified
4. Recommendations:
 - a. Should address most important findings
 - b. Usually, present options or qualified recommendations (“The organization may want to consider...”), since ultimately they should take ownership for changes
 - c. Draw on theory and research to support recommendations

Sources for Communication Audit Tools

Cheney, G., Christensen, L. T., & Zorn, T. E., & Ganesh, S. (2003). *Organizational communication in the age of globalization: Issues, reflections, and practices*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press. (ch. 15)

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