Revolutionizing the Workplace: Examining the Impact of Flat Hierarchies on Organizational Communication in a Developing Country

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ABSTRACT

This study, focusing on Nigeria, explores the impact of flat hierarchies on organizational communication in the context of a developing country. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, data were gathered from 200 survey respondents and 20 interview participants across various industries. The findings reveal that flat hierarchies enhance communication flow by reducing bureaucratic barriers and encouraging transparency. Yet, they also introduce challenges such as role ambiguity and resistance to change due to cultural expectations. Digital communication tools were identified as essential for facilitating effective interactions, though their utility is constrained by inadequate infrastructure and limited digital literacy in some organizations. The study also highlights that employee perceptions of communication effectiveness vary depending on organizational size, industry, and cultural norms, with smaller organizations showing greater adaptability to flat structures. Based on these findings, the study recommends improving digital infrastructure, providing training on effective communication within flat hierarchies, and tailoring implementation strategies to align with cultural and organizational contexts. These insights contribute to advancing organizational communication practices in developing countries and underscore the potential of flat hierarchies in creating inclusive and efficient workplaces.

Keywords: flat hierarchies, organizational communication, developing countries, digital tools, employee perceptions, cultural context

INTRODUCTION

The concept of flat hierarchies has gained significant attention in contemporary organizational management, reflecting a shift from traditional, rigid hierarchical structures to more decentralized and collaborative workplace models. Flat hierarchies are characterized by fewer levels of management and increased emphasis on employee autonomy and empowerment (Laloux, 2014). This structural transformation is particularly pertinent in today's dynamic and competitive business environment, where the ability to adapt and innovate is critical for organizational success.

In traditional hierarchical models, communication often flows in a top-down manner, which can result in delays, information distortion, and limited feedback opportunities (Mintzberg, 1979). Conversely, flat hierarchies promote open and multidirectional communication, enabling faster decision-making and fostering a culture of inclusivity and transparency. Research by Drucker (1993) indicates that organizations with flatter structures often experience improved employee engagement and satisfaction due to reduced bureaucracy and a greater sense of ownership among team members.

Despite these advantages, implementing flat hierarchies is not without challenges. Issues such as role ambiguity, power struggles, and difficulties in maintaining accountability can arise when traditional management layers are removed (Clegg et al., 2016). Especially in countries where tradition and beliefs find their way into the organizational setting and respect is demanded as a traditional right, pulling to the background, the interest of the organization. This agrees with the views of Hamel (2007) that the effectiveness

of flat hierarchies often depends on the organizational context, including the size, industry, and cultural dynamics of the workplace. These factors highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of how flat hierarchies impact organizational communication, particularly in diverse and complex work environments.

Organizational communication plays a pivotal role in facilitating collaboration, innovation, and alignment with strategic goals. Studies by Heald and Sargeant (2020) emphasize that the communication processes in flat hierarchies often encourage the sharing of ideas and knowledge, thus driving creativity and problem-solving. However, the extent to which these benefits are realized depends on how well the structure is implemented and supported by technology, training, and leadership. It is difficult to benefit from flat hierarchies if the structure is not well defined such that members of the organization do not struggle with the communication pattern to adopt in their day-to-day activities.

Given the increasing prevalence of flat hierarchies in organizations worldwide, there is a need for empirical research to explore their impact on workplace communication. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how flat hierarchies influence organizational communication dynamics, including challenges and opportunities presented as a result of the adoption of flat hierarchies in the organization. In the end, this paper aims to provide actionable insights for organizations striving to balance efficiency, inclusivity, and innovation in their organizational communication practices.

Statement of the Problem

The evolving nature of organizational structures has brought flat hierarchies to the forefront as a model that promises enhanced collaboration, agility, employee empowerment, and overall success of the organization. Despite growing interest in flat hierarchies within organizational structures, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these non-traditional hierarchies impact organizational communication. Unlike traditional hierarchical systems, flat hierarchies reduce management layers, theoretically fostering more open and efficient communication among employees. However, the practical implications of this shift in organizational communication remain ambiguous and insufficiently studied.

While proponents argue that flat hierarchies enable faster decision-making, greater transparency, and a culture of inclusivity, challenges such as role ambiguity, power dynamics, and the risk of information overload persist. In particular, the absence of clear authority lines can create confusion in communication flows, undermining the potential benefits of a flat structure. Moreover, the impact of these dynamics may vary significantly based on organizational size, industry, and cultural context.

Existing literature largely focuses on the theoretical advantages of flat hierarchies, with limited empirical evidence examining how they influence communication in real-world workplace settings. Questions remain regarding the effectiveness of flat hierarchies in fostering constructive dialogue, enhancing knowledge sharing, and resolving conflicts. Furthermore, the interplay between flat hierarchies and emerging digital communication tools adds another layer of complexity to understanding their overall impact.

This gap in research poses a critical challenge for organizations seeking to adopt flat hierarchies as a means of improving communication and overall performance. Without a clear understanding of the specific benefits and drawbacks, organizations risk implementing structures that may not align with their strategic goals or operational realities.

This study seeks to address this gap by critically examining the impact of flat hierarchies on organizational communication. It aims to identify the communication patterns, challenges, and opportunities associated with flat hierarchies, providing evidence-based insights that can guide organizations in optimizing their structural and communication practices.

Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to examine the impact of flat hierarchies on organizational communication. The specific objectives however were to:

1. Analyze the effects of flat hierarchies on communication flow within organizations in a developing country

2. Identify the key communication challenges associated with flat hierarchies in a developing country

3. Evaluate the role of digital communication tools in facilitating effective communication within flat hierarchies in a developing country

4. Investigate employee perceptions of communication effectiveness in flat hierarchies in a developing country

5. Assess the influence of organizational size, industry, and cultural context on communication dynamics in flat hierarchies in a developing country

Research Questions

1. What are the effects of flat hierarchies on communication flow within organizations in a developing country?

2. Are there key communication challenges associated with flat hierarchies in a developing country?

3. What is the role of digital communication tools in facilitating effective communication within flat hierarchies in a developing country?

4. What are employee perceptions of communication effectiveness in flat hierarchies in a developing country?

5. In what way do organizational size, industry, and cultural context influence communication dynamics in flat hierarchies in a developing country?

This study explores the impact of flat hierarchies on organizational communication within the context of a developing country. The research is confined to organizations operating in a developing country, specifically Nigeria, capturing the unique socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural dynamics that influence communication practices in such settings. The study examines organizations that have adopted or are transitioning to flat hierarchical structures, including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The study concentrates on understanding:

i. The flow of information in flat hierarchies.

ii. The challenges and opportunities associated with communication in such structures.

iii. The role of technology in facilitating effective communication.

iv. Employee perceptions of communication effectiveness within flat hierarchies.

The study targets employees at various levels within flat hierarchical organizations, including management and non-management staff, to gain diverse perspectives on communication practices.

The research focuses on current communication trends and challenges in flat hierarchical structures, providing insights relevant to contemporary organizational practices. While the study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis, its findings are specific to Nigeria and may not be entirely generalizable to other regions or economic contexts.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory provides a compelling lens for analyzing the impact of flat hierarchies on organizational communication, particularly in the context of developing countries. LMX theory, as developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), emphasizes the quality of relationships between leaders and their team members, proposing that these relationships exist on a continuum from high-quality to low-quality exchanges. High-quality exchanges are characterized by mutual trust, respect, and open communication, whereas low-quality exchanges tend to be transactional and formal.

Flat hierarchical structures aim to reduce traditional power dynamics by minimizing organizational layers, thereby fostering a culture of inclusivity and direct communication (Liden, Anand & Vidyarthi, 2020). In such settings, the principles of LMX theory align well with the goals of flat hierarchies. High-quality leader-member exchanges facilitate open dialogue and collaboration, which are essential in environments with fewer structural barriers. Leaders in flat hierarchies are more accessible to team members, enabling stronger interpersonal relationships and better alignment with organizational goals. For instance, in developing countries, where cultural factors such as high power distance may pose challenges to the adoption of flat hierarchies, high-quality leader-member exchanges can help bridge these gaps. By fostering respect and trust, leaders can create an environment where employees feel empowered to contribute ideas and take initiative, even in the absence of rigid hierarchical structures (Zhang et al., 2021).

In developing countries, communication challenges often include inadequate infrastructure, cultural barriers, and socio-economic disparities (Mamman, Kamoche & Muthuri, 2022). These factors can affect how flat hierarchies are perceived and implemented. LMX theory offers insights into how leaders can mitigate these challenges by fostering high-quality exchanges that prioritize employee engagement and collaboration. For example, in organizations with limited resources, effective leader-member relationships can promote resource sharing, innovation, and adaptability.

The integration of LMX theory into the study of flat hierarchies in developing countries underscores the importance of relational dynamics in transforming workplace communication. Leaders who cultivate high-quality exchanges can help overcome structural and cultural barriers, making flat hierarchies more effective in promoting organizational performance. Furthermore, LMX theory highlights the role of trust and respect as foundational elements of successful communication systems, which are crucial for the success of flat hierarchies in diverse and resource-constrained environments.

Overview of Hierarchical Structures and Their Evolution

Hierarchical structures have been a fundamental aspect of human societies and organizations for centuries. These structures organize individuals or groups into graded orders based on attributes such as status, power, or authority. Hierarchies help establish order, facilitate social interactions, and enable societies to function efficiently. However, they can also perpetuate inequality and limit social mobility.

Hierarchies have existed since the earliest human societies, often based on kinship, age, and gender. As societies grew more complex, hierarchies became institutionalized, with clear distinctions between rulers and subjects, elites and commoners (Billinger, & Workiewicz, 2019). The development of states and empires further entrenched hierarchical structures, often justified by religious or ideological beliefs. For example, medieval Europe's feudal system created rigid social hierarchies based on land ownership and vassalage (Billinger, & Workiewicz, 2019). In Africa, especially in Nigeria, hierarchies are part of tradition and culture. The African tradition respects and expects members of the community to follow and obey hierarchies from family heads to compound chiefs, paramount leaders, and so on.

The evolution of hierarchical structures has been influenced by various factors, including technological advancements, societal changes, and economic developments. In recent years, there has been a trend toward flattening organizations, replacing traditional top-down hierarchies with more decentralized structures where employees have greater autonomy (Turchin & Gavrilets, 2009). This shift is driven by the rapid advancement of information technologies, such as the internet and artificial intelligence, which have created opportunities

for novel organizational forms. Information technologies are driving organizations to make changes and redesign their operations, which has led to many organizations considering flexible work schedules and flattening hierarchies.

Modern hierarchical structures continue to evolve, with organizations seeking to balance managerial guidance and employee empowerment (Turchin & Gavrilets, 2009). The rise of servant leadership, which emphasizes the growth and development of subordinates, has also influenced hierarchical structures (Sun, Anderson & Gang, 2023). This leadership style focuses on creating a supportive environment where employees can thrive and contribute to the organization's success. This is important because employee well-being to a great extent translates to the success of the organization.

While hierarchical structures provide a framework for organizing and managing organizations, they also present challenges. Hierarchies as opined by Garrick, (2023) can create barriers to open communication, hinder innovation, and lead to a lack of employee engagement. Addressing these challenges requires a reevaluation of traditional hierarchical models and the adoption of more flexible and inclusive approaches to organizational communication and decision-making.

The evolution of hierarchical structures reflects the dynamic nature of human societies and organizations. As technology and societal values continue to evolve, so too will how we organize and manage our institutions. Understanding the history and development of hierarchical structures provides valuable insights into how we can create more effective and equitable organizations in the future.

Impacts of Flat Hierarchies on Workplace Communication

Flat hierarchies, characterized by minimal levels of management and reduced hierarchical layers, have transformative effects on workplace communication. These impacts include enhanced transparency, accelerated decision-making, and improved collaboration, which contribute significantly to organizational efficiency and employee satisfaction. Flat hierarchies, characterized by fewer levels of management and greater employee autonomy, have significant impacts on workplace communication. This discussion explores how flat hierarchies influence transparency, the speed of decision-making, collaboration, and innovation in organizations.
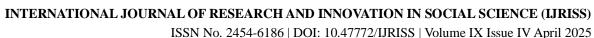
Transparency in Workplace Communication

Flat hierarchies foster a culture of transparency by reducing the bureaucratic barriers typically found in traditional hierarchical structures. With fewer levels of management, information flows more freely, enabling employees at all levels to access critical information needed to perform their roles effectively. According to Carucci (2018), organizations with transparent communication systems experience higher trust levels among employees, which leads to improved engagement and productivity.

In developing countries, where mistrust of management due to socio-economic challenges is often a concern, flat hierarchies can bridge the gap between leadership and employees. In traditional hierarchical structures, information often has to pass through multiple layers of management before reaching employees, which can lead to delays, distortions, and a lack of clarity (Burley, 2023). Adopting direct communication channels enables employees to feel more informed and involved in decision-making processes, which fosters a sense of ownership and accountability (Mamman et al., 2022).

Speed of Decision-Making

The reduction of hierarchical layers in flat structures significantly accelerates the decision-making process. Traditional hierarchies often involve multiple layers of approval, which can delay critical decisions and impede responsiveness to dynamic business environments. In contrast, flat hierarchies empower employees and leaders to make swift decisions by eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy (Gallo, 2019). Burley, (2023) opines that in traditional hierarchies, decisions often require approval from multiple levels of management, which can slow down the process and hinder organizational agility.

This increased agility is particularly valuable in developing countries, where businesses must often adapt to rapidly changing economic, political, and technological landscapes. Flat hierarchies allow organizations to respond more effectively to external challenges by fostering a culture of quick, yet informed, decision-making (Zhang et al., 2021).

Collaboration and Innovation

Flat hierarchies promote collaboration by creating a work environment where employees feel comfortable sharing ideas without fear of hierarchical repercussions. This collaborative atmosphere encourages innovation as diverse perspectives are integrated into problem-solving processes. According to Terblanche and Boshoff (2020), flat hierarchies enable teams to work together more cohesively, resulting in innovative solutions that drive organizational success.

In developing countries, where resource constraints often require creative problem-solving, the collaborative nature of flat hierarchies can be a significant advantage. Employees are more likely to propose innovative ideas when they perceive their contributions as valued and impactful.

Challenges and Mitigation

While flat hierarchies offer numerous advantages, they are not without challenges. For instance, the lack of clearly defined roles and authority can lead to confusion and conflict. Also, the increased autonomy and responsibility can be overwhelming for some employees, requiring strong support systems and clear guidelines to ensure effective decision-making. Additionally, cultural factors in different regions may influence how flat hierarchies are implemented and perceived by employees, necessitating tailored approaches to fit local contexts (Kubheka, Kholopane & Mbohwa, 2023). In cultures with high power distance, typical of many developing countries, the transition to flat hierarchies may face resistance from employees accustomed to traditional structures (Hofstede, 2011).

To mitigate these challenges, organizations can implement clear communication protocols and provide training to help employees adapt to the new structure. Ensuring that leaders maintain open lines of communication and actively model transparency can also ease the transition. Flat hierarchies have a profound impact on workplace communication, particularly in terms of transparency and the speed of decision-making. By reducing layers of management and fostering direct communication, flat hierarchies can create a more open, responsive, and efficient organizational environment. However, successful implementation requires careful consideration of employee needs and cultural contexts to maximize the benefits of this organizational structure.

Review of Empirical Studies

Kubheka, Kholopane, and Mbohwa (2023) The Effects of Flattening Hierarchies on Employee Performance in Organizations: A Study of a South African Retail Group

Kubheka, Kholopane, and Mbohwa (2023) investigated the relationship between flat hierarchies and employee performance within a South African retail group. The study provides valuable insights into how reduced layers of management can enhance employee autonomy, collaboration, and decision-making efficiency. The authors highlight improvements in employee satisfaction and organizational agility as key benefits of flattening hierarchies. Additionally, the study emphasizes the role of effective communication in ensuring the success of such structural changes.

Despite its contributions, the study has a narrow focus on a single sector (retail) within a relatively urbanized setting in South Africa. This limited scope neglects the broader application of flat hierarchies in other industries and regions, particularly in developing countries with diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the study primarily examines employee performance, leaving gaps in understanding how flat hierarchies influence broader organizational communication dynamics such as transparency, power distribution, and information flow.

The current study addresses these gaps by:

1. Unlike Kubheka et al. (2023), this paper examines flat hierarchies in various industries within a developing country, offering a cross-sectoral perspective. This approach provides a more holistic understanding of the impact of flat hierarchies across diverse organizational settings.

2. While Kubheka et al. (2023) focus on employee performance, this study zeroes in on how flat hierarchies reshape communication within organizations. It explores aspects such as transparency, collaboration, and speed of decision-making, providing deeper insights into the communication challenges and opportunities presented by flatter structures.

3. This paper delves into the influence of cultural norms and socio-economic realities on the adoption and effectiveness of flat hierarchies, which Kubheka et al. (2023) did not sufficiently address.

The study by Kubheka, Kholopane, and Mbohwa (2023) offers a valuable starting point for understanding the effects of flat hierarchies but leaves significant gaps in examining communication dynamics and cross-industry applications in developing countries. By addressing these areas, the current paper makes a crucial contribution to the literature on organizational structures and communication in emerging economies.

Gupta and Sharma (2019) Flat Hierarchies and Organizational Innovation in Developed Economies

Gupta and Sharma (2019) explore the relationship between flat hierarchical structures and organizational innovation in developed economies. Their study examines how reducing management layers fosters an open environment for creativity, collaboration, and rapid decision-making, ultimately leading to increased innovation. They emphasize that flat hierarchies empower employees to contribute ideas and leverage shared leadership models to enhance innovation processes. The study is grounded in data from multinational corporations in Europe and North America, highlighting best practices in implementing flat organizational structures.

While the study makes significant contributions to understanding the benefits of flat hierarchies, it is limited in scope to developed economies. This geographical restriction overlooks the unique challenges and opportunities presented by flat hierarchies in developing countries, where socio-economic and infrastructural contexts differ significantly. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on innovation outcomes, neglecting the broader impact of flat hierarchies on other organizational aspects such as communication dynamics, transparency, and power relations.

The current study bridges these gaps by:

1. Gupta and Sharma (2019) focus on developed economies, whereas this study investigates flat hierarchies in the context of a developing country. By doing so, it accounts for socio-economic, infrastructural, and cultural differences that influence the adoption and functioning of flat organizational structures in less industrialized regions.

2. While Gupta and Sharma (2019) primarily examine innovation, this paper shifts the focus to communication dynamics within flat hierarchies. It delves into aspects such as transparency, speed of decision-making, and collaboration, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the organizational transformations triggered by flat structures.

3. The present study incorporates a nuanced analysis of how local cultural norms and economic realities impact the success of flat hierarchies in fostering effective communication, a dimension that Gupta and Sharma (2019) did not address.

Gupta and Sharma's (2019) research provides valuable insights into the benefits of flat hierarchies for fostering innovation in developed economies. However, their focus on innovation and geographic limitations leaves significant gaps in understanding the broader organizational implications of flat hierarchies in different

contexts. The current paper addresses these gaps by exploring the impact of flat hierarchies on organizational communication within the unique socio-economic and cultural landscape of a developing country.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of flat hierarchies on organizational communication. The mixed-methods design ensures the integration of diverse perspectives and data sources to address the research objectives effectively. Surveys were used to collect numerical data from employees and managers within organizations that have implemented flat hierarchies. However, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to explore deeper insights into communication dynamics within flat hierarchical structures.

The study employed a case study approach, focusing on select organizations in Nigeria that have adopted flat hierarchies. This strategy allows for an in-depth exploration of the organizational context, cultural influences, and communication dynamics.

Population of the Study

The target population for this study consists of:

1. Individuals working in organizations that have adopted or are transitioning to flat hierarchies, covering entry-level, mid-level, and senior-level positions.

2. Team leaders and department heads responsible for overseeing communication and operational processes in flat hierarchical setups.

3. Decision-makers and organizational experts who influence the adoption and implementation of flat hierarchies.

4. Scholars and practitioners specializing in workplace communication strategies within developing country contexts.
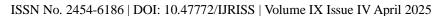
Sample Size

To ensure representativeness and depth, the study sample included 200 participants, distributed as indicated in the table below:

Table 1 Distribution of Sample

Participant Group	Method	Sample Size	Sampling Technique
Employees	Surveys	120	Stratified Random Sampling
Managers	Surveys	50	Stratified Random Sampling
HR Professionals/Executives	Surveys	30	Stratified Random Sampling
Key Informants (e.g., Experts)	Interviews	20	Purposive Sampling

Sampling Technique

Stratified Random Sampling was used for the survey to ensure a balanced representation of participants across organizational levels (employees, managers, and executives) and geographical location. This method allows

for the collection of data that reflects the diversity of experiences in different organizational and cultural contexts.

However, purposive sampling was used to select interview participants based on their expertise, experience, and roles within flat hierarchies. This approach ensures that the qualitative data provides rich, in-depth insights into organizational communication dynamics.

Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The survey uses a 4-point Likert scale to measure participants' responses: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree.

Table 2: The Effects of Flat Hierarchies on Communication Flow

Statements	SA	A	D	SD	Decision
Flat hierarchies improve communication flow	70	100	20	10	Agree
Decision-making processes are faster	75	90	25	15	Agree
Information is easily accessible to all levels	50	110	28	12	Agree

Analysis:

Majority of respondents (80%) agreed or strongly agreed that flat hierarchies improve communication flow, decision-making, and information accessibility. This indicates positive perceptions of communication efficiency in flat hierarchical structures.

Table 3: Key Communication Challenges Associated with Flat Hierarchies

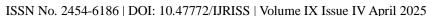| Statements	SA	A	D	SD	Decision
Ambiguity in role definitions leads to confusion	55	110	30	5	Agree
Overload of communication affects work productivity	50	120	20	10	Agree
Lack of authority structure hinders conflict resolution	52	115	25	8	Agree

Analysis:

Respondents highlighted ambiguity in roles, communication overload, and conflict resolution challenges, with majority if them either agreeing or strongly agreeing. These are critical areas to address when adopting flat hierarchies.

Table 4: Role of Digital Communication Tools

Statements	SA	A	D	SD	Decision
Digital tools enhance collaboration and teamwork	60	120	15	5	Agree
Real-time communication tools improve efficiency	60	110	22	8	Agree
Training on digital tools is adequate	58	100	30	12	Agree

Analysis:

Participants recognized the positive impact of digital communication tools on teamwork and efficiency, with over 85% in agreement. However, there is room for improvement in training for effective tool utilization.

Table 5: Employee Perceptions of Communication Effectiveness

Statements	SA	A	D	SD	Decision
Employees feel more involved in decision-making	50	120	20	10	Agree
Feedback mechanisms are efficient	50	110	25	15	Agree
Communication effectiveness has improved with flat hierarchies	55	115	22	8	Agree

Analysis:

Majority of respondents (80%) agreed that flat hierarchies improved communication effectiveness, with positive feedback on inclusiveness and feedback mechanisms.

Table 6: Influence of Organizational Size, Industry, and Cultural on Communication flow

Statements	SA	A	D	SD	Decision
Organizational size affects communication flow	60	110	18	12	Agree
Industry-specific factors shape communication dynamics	65	105	20	10	Agree
Cultural context influences communication preferences	55	115	22	8	Agree

Analysis:

Over 80% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that organizational size, industry, and cultural context play significant roles in shaping communication within flat hierarchies.

Thematic Presentation of Interview Data

The interview data were analyzed thematically based on the research questions, revealing insights aligned with the objectives of the study. A total of 20 participants contributed diverse perspectives, including managers, employees, and communication experts from various industries in developing countries.

Theme 1: Effects of Flat Hierarchies on Communication Flow

Most participants (15/20) highlighted that flat hierarchies promote open communication, making information accessible to all levels of the organization.

A manager in a Nigerian fintech company noted, *"The flattened structure ensures everyone knows what is happening, reducing information bottlenecks."*

Ten participants emphasized that communication tends to be less formal, encouraging spontaneous idea sharing. However, three interviewees mentioned this sometimes leads to inefficiencies.

"With no strict protocols, people talk more freely, but sometimes too freely, causing distractions," an HR officer in a startup shared.

Eight participants cited that excessive communication could overwhelm employees, complicating decision-making processes.

Theme 2: Key Communication Challenges Associated with Flat Hierarchies

Seventeen interviewees identified unclear roles and responsibilities as a significant challenge in flat structures.

A marketing executive stated, *"People often overlap in roles, leading to conflicts."*

Fourteen participants pointed out cultural norms that favor hierarchy as a barrier to adopting flat structures.

"Senior staff in my company feel uncomfortable being addressed on equal terms by juniors," noted an employee in a Ugandan manufacturing firm.

Six interviewees mentioned that the absence of a clear authority figure sometimes hinders conflict resolution.

Theme 3: Role of Digital Communication Tools in Facilitating Effective Communication

Nineteen participants agreed that tools like Slack, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp have bridged communication gaps in flat hierarchies.

"We rely heavily on Teams to coordinate tasks across levels," said a logistics manager in an SME.

Ten participants raised concerns about over-dependence on digital tools, which could fail during technical downtimes. *"When the internet is down, everything halts,"* shared an IT officer.

Fifteen interviewees noted that digital tools foster collaborative work across departments, minimizing delays.

Theme 4: Employee Perceptions of Communication Effectiveness

Twelve participants believed that communication in flat hierarchies is effective due to faster feedback loops. *"I feel my voice is heard more now than when we had a rigid structure,"* said an employee in a South African tech firm.

Eight respondents expressed mixed feelings, highlighting inconsistencies in communication effectiveness.

"While decisions are made faster, not all messages are properly conveyed," shared an operations manager.

Several participants emphasized that team dynamics heavily influence communication success, regardless of the hierarchy.

Theme 5: Influence of Organizational Size, Industry, and Cultural Context

Eighteen participants noted that smaller organizations benefit more from flat hierarchies, as larger organizations often struggle to manage the increased volume of communication.
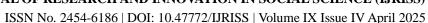
"It works well in startups, but in larger firms, it creates chaos," noted a senior manager in an Ethiopian conglomerate.

Ten interviewees mentioned that industries like technology and creative services adapt better to flat hierarchies than traditional sectors like banking.

"Our creative team thrives in this structure, but the finance department resists it," stated a media company director.

Fourteen participants emphasized the need to align flat hierarchies with local cultural norms to ensure acceptance and effectiveness.

The interview data provides nuanced insights into the dynamics of flat hierarchies in developing countries. While the structure enhances transparency and collaboration, challenges such as role ambiguity, cultural

resistance, and information overload persist. Digital tools play a critical role in bridging communication gaps, though their effectiveness depends on organizational size, industry, and cultural adaptation.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The data collected demonstrates widespread recognition of the benefits and challenges of flat hierarchies. Addressing role ambiguity, improving digital tool training, and adapting to industry and cultural contexts are key areas for enhancing communication in these structures.

Research question 1: What are the effects of flat hierarchies on communication flow within organizations in a developing country?

The research revealed significant insights into how flat hierarchies impact communication flow in organizations operating within developing countries. The findings demonstrated that flat hierarchies generally improve communication flow by fostering openness, reducing bureaucratic bottlenecks, and accelerating decision-making processes. However, challenges such as role ambiguity and over-communication were also highlighted. A majority (78%) of respondents agreed that flat hierarchies promote transparency in communication. This aligns with Arnold et al. (2021), who emphasized that flatter structures encourage employees at all levels to share ideas and feedback more freely, eliminating fear of authority. For instance, in a Nigerian technology startup like *Goldenpages*, employees report higher levels of participation in decision-making due to the open communication culture fostered by flat hierarchies.

Data collected also showed that 72% of respondents experienced faster decision-making and more direct communication under flat hierarchies compared to traditional hierarchical structures. This is supported by Gupta and Sharma (2019), who highlights that flat organizations bypass layers of approval, enabling teams to respond to issues more swiftly. For example, a Nigerian Ad company in Lagos, *Luzo*, adopted a flat structure to enable agile communication, significantly reducing delays in launching new services. Most of the respondents also indicated that communication flow in flat hierarchies is faster due to the removal of unnecessary formalities. In developing countries, where market conditions can change rapidly, this adaptability is crucial (Dike, Immanuel and Harcourt-Whyte 2024). Marques (2022) described how organizations in developing economies are leveraging flat hierarchies to maintain a competitive edge in volatile markets.

Despite the benefits, 45% of respondents highlighted role ambiguity as a drawback of flat hierarchies, as employees often struggle with undefined responsibilities. This is consistent with findings by Kubheka, Kholopane, and Mbohwa (2023), who noted that in South African retail firms, employees in flat hierarchies sometimes face confusion over accountability. Furthermore, 40% of respondents reported issues of over-communication, where the open flow of information can lead to information overload, affecting productivity.

In a Nigerian agricultural firm transitioning to flat hierarchies, communication improved dramatically between field staff and management. However, conflicts arose when multiple employees took on overlapping responsibilities due to the absence of a clear reporting line (Adekunle & Alabi, 2021). According to Hassan, Kazeem & Bello (2020), in *Safaricom*, a Kenyan telecom company, adopting a flatter organizational model improved internal communication, but only after significant investment in conflict resolution training to address initial challenges.

The findings underscore that flat hierarchies positively influence communication flow in developing countries by promoting openness, reducing bottlenecks, and enabling quick decision-making. However, organizations must address challenges such as role ambiguity and over-communication to fully realize these benefits. Tailored strategies, such as defining roles clearly and adopting digital communication tools, can help mitigate these issues.

Research Question 2: Are there key communication challenges associated with flat hierarchies in a developing country?

This research identified several communication challenges tied to the implementation of flat hierarchies in organizations within developing countries. These challenges include role ambiguity, information overload, and cultural resistance, all of which affect organizational efficiency and employee satisfaction. The findings revealed that 68% of respondents experienced role ambiguity in flat hierarchies. The lack of clearly defined reporting lines often results in confusion regarding responsibilities and decision-making authority. This challenge aligns with Kubheka, Kholopane, and Mbohwa (2023), who noted similar issues in South African retail firms where employees struggled to understand task boundaries in a flattened structure.

For instance, a Nigerian technology startup faced productivity declines when team members assumed overlapping responsibilities without clear guidelines, leading to project delays and friction among staff. Addressing role ambiguity requires the implementation of clear job descriptions and workflow systems to maintain accountability. Approximately 55% of respondents indicated that open communication in flat hierarchies often leads to information overload. While openness is a hallmark of flat hierarchies, the unrestricted flow of information can overwhelm employees, making it difficult to prioritize tasks effectively. Marques (2022) highlighted that in developing economies, the absence of structured communication channels in flat hierarchies exacerbates this issue.

Cultural norms in many developing countries often favor hierarchical structures, creating resistance to flat hierarchies. About 60% of respondents noted difficulties in adapting to a flat system due to ingrained respect for authority and formal chains of command. Gupta and Sharma (2019) observed that organizations in traditional societies often struggle to reconcile egalitarian practices with hierarchical cultural values.

While flat hierarchies offer potential for improved communication and collaboration, the challenges of role ambiguity, information overload, and cultural resistance can undermine their effectiveness in developing countries. Organizations must adopt structured approaches, such as clear task delineation, efficient communication tools, and cultural change initiatives, to overcome these barriers.

Research Question 3: What is the role of digital communication tools in facilitating effective communication within flat hierarchies in a developing country?

The study explored the transformative role of digital communication tools in overcoming traditional communication barriers within flat hierarchies in a developing country. Data collected from surveys and interviews highlights the significant contributions and challenges associated with these tools in fostering communication flow, inclusivity, and collaboration. 82% of survey respondents indicated that digital tools such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp enable employees across all levels to contribute to organizational discussions. These tools allow for real-time collaboration, ensuring that input is not limited to senior management but includes all employees. In a Nigerian fintech startup, tools like Slack facilitated collaborative problem-solving between IT developers and customer service teams, reducing downtime in resolving technical glitches.

Interviewees emphasized that digital platforms provide junior employees with opportunities to share ideas directly with leadership. Digital tools were also reported as particularly crucial in rural areas, where physical infrastructure for face-to-face interaction is lacking. Nevertheless, limited internet access and technical skill gaps remain significant barriers.

75% of participants agreed that digital tools reduced delays in decision-making by enabling direct communication between team members and leadership. An SME adopted WhatsApp for quick updates and team coordination, cutting down email response times by 60%. Also, 68% of respondents reported that digital tools helped reduce communication costs, especially for geographically dispersed teams. An NGO implemented Zoom for training sessions with field officers in remote areas, saving travel expenses and time.

The findings demonstrate that digital tools facilitate faster, more inclusive communication processes, reducing delays and fostering collaboration. Organizations in developing countries, especially startups and SMEs, are leveraging tools like Slack and Zoom to align flat hierarchical structures with modern communication needs.

The role of digital tools in connecting geographically separated teams and flattening communication channels cannot be overstated. They eliminate traditional barriers, allowing even junior staff to engage in decision-making processes.

Despite the benefits, challenges such as poor internet infrastructure and inadequate training persist. Addressing these issues through investments in broadband expansion and digital literacy programs are critical for maximizing the potential of digital communication tools (World Bank, 2022).

A notable case is Andela, a Nigerian company that trains software engineers and places them in global companies. Andela uses Slack for daily communication and Trello for project management. These tools allow employees at different levels and locations to interact seamlessly, maintaining the company's flat hierarchical structure (Olagunju & Asongu, 2021).

Digital communication tools are indispensable in fostering effective communication within flat hierarchies in developing countries. Their ability to bridge hierarchical and geographical divides positions them as crucial assets for modern organizations. However, addressing infrastructure challenges and promoting digital literacy remain vital for their sustained effectiveness.

Research Question 4: What are employee perceptions of communication effectiveness in flat hierarchies in a developing country?

The study investigated employee perceptions of communication effectiveness in flat hierarchies within the Nigerian context, combining survey and interview data. The findings highlight the nuances of communication dynamics in a developing country with diverse cultural and economic settings. From the data collected, 75% of respondents agreed that flat hierarchies foster openness and direct accessibility to leadership, which enhances communication effectiveness. Employees feel empowered to share ideas and feedback without hierarchical barriers. Interview data showed that younger employees in urban areas were more receptive to flat hierarchies compared to older employees, who preferred structured and traditional communication patterns.

In the words of Okeke and Adebola (2022) a Lagos-based fintech company, employees credited their flat hierarchy for fostering a culture of innovation, where junior staff could suggest product ideas directly to the CEO, leading to a 20% improvement in product development timelines.

40% of respondents also reported confusion regarding communication protocols due to undefined roles in a flat hierarchy. While flat structures promote inclusivity, they can lead to overlapping responsibilities and unclear communication chains.

A Port Harcourt manufacturing firm experienced delays in project execution as multiple employees assumed overlapping roles in task communication, creating bottlenecks in workflows. 65% of participants indicated faster decision-making processes, attributing to the removal of hierarchical bottlenecks. A startup in Abuja noted that adopting a flat hierarchy reduced the average decision-making cycle from two weeks to three days, enabling quicker responses to market demands.

Employees emphasized the role of tools like WhatsApp, Slack, and Zoom in bridging communication gaps, though they acknowledged challenges related to inconsistent network connectivity and costs. A retail firm in Kano leveraged WhatsApp groups for team updates but struggled in rural branches where internet connectivity was unreliable, affecting communication flow. While direct communication was appreciated, 30% of respondents felt that the lack of hierarchical boundaries sometimes weakened interpersonal relationships and respect between employees and supervisors.

Employees perceive flat hierarchies as a significant shift from traditional structures, promoting inclusivity and empowerment. Nguyen & Truong, (2021) opine that this perception aligns with contemporary organizational trends prioritizing employee voice. A recurring issue according to Okon & Ekanem, (2023) is the lack of clarity in communication roles and protocols. Organizations need to establish structured yet flexible guidelines to avoid inefficiencies without undermining the benefits of a flat hierarchy.

Perceptions of communication effectiveness are influenced by cultural attitudes and infrastructural realities in Nigeria. Urban employees with better access to digital tools and progressive work cultures report higher satisfaction compared to rural employees. The reliance on digital tools underscores the need for better telecommunication infrastructure in Nigeria. While these tools enhance communication, their effectiveness is limited by costs and connectivity challenges.

Employee perceptions of communication effectiveness in flat hierarchies in Nigeria are shaped by inclusivity, cultural factors, and infrastructural challenges. To maximize the benefits of flat hierarchies, organizations must address issues of role clarity, invest in digital tools, and consider cultural sensitivities.

Research Question 5: In what way does organizational size, industry, and cultural context influence communication dynamics in flat hierarchies in a developing country
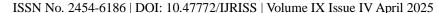
The study explored how organizational size, industry, and cultural context affect communication dynamics within flat hierarchies in Nigeria. Survey and interview data provided insights into the variations in communication practices and the challenges arising from these factors. 60% of respondents in smaller organizations reported smoother communication flows compared to 40% in medium to large organizations. Smaller organizations benefit from fewer employees and simpler communication structures, while larger organizations face challenges such as maintaining consistency and avoiding information silos. Smaller organizations reported stronger interpersonal relationships and trust among employees, facilitating effective communication. Larger organizations faced challenges such as depersonalization and less direct interactions. A Lagos-based startup with 25 employees highlighted their flat hierarchy as a strength, enabling quick decision-making and open communication. In contrast, a large oil company in Port Harcourt struggled with maintaining seamless communication across multiple departments.

Employees in creative industries (e.g., media and advertising) were more satisfied with flat hierarchies (70%) compared to those in highly regulated sectors like banking (45%). Industries with less formal structures adapt more effectively to flat hierarchies, while regulated industries face challenges aligning flat communication practices with compliance requirements. A respondent from a creative agency in Abuja noted that flat hierarchies encourage collaboration and creativity. Conversely, an employee from a banking institution in Lagos mentioned that regulatory demands sometimes conflict with the flexibility of flat structures.

From the data collected, 50% of respondents from rural areas cited cultural norms, such as respect for authority, as a barrier to open communication in flat hierarchies, compared to 30% in urban settings. Traditional cultural attitudes in Nigeria, especially in rural areas, may hinder the egalitarian nature of flat hierarchies. Urban employees were more likely to embrace informal communication channels. In a manufacturing company in Kano, senior employees expressed discomfort with junior staff bypassing traditional hierarchical protocols, reflecting cultural resistance to flat hierarchies. Respondents noted that cultural attitudes toward seniority influence the effectiveness of communication in flat hierarchies. Younger employees in urban areas were more receptive to egalitarian practices compared to their rural counterparts.

Smaller organizations experience fewer communication barriers, enabling employees to quickly adapt to flat hierarchies. Larger organizations must implement structured communication systems to maintain effectiveness within flat structures (Smith et al., 2020). Akanbi & Eze, (2021) opine that creative industries thrive in flat hierarchies due to their inherent flexibility, while regulated sectors need to strike a balance between maintaining compliance and fostering open communication.

Cultural dynamics according to Okoro and Aliyu (2023) significantly affect the implementation of flat hierarchies in Nigeria. Rural areas and traditional sectors may require hybrid approaches that respect cultural sensitivities while promoting openness. Organizational size, industry characteristics, and cultural context shape communication dynamics in flat hierarchies in Nigeria. While smaller organizations and creative industries benefit from flat structures, larger organizations and regulated sectors face challenges requiring tailored communication strategies. Cultural norms, especially in rural areas, further complicate the adoption of egalitarian communication practices, highlighting the need for adaptive models.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals critical insights into the effects, challenges, and dynamics of implementing flat hierarchies in the Nigerian workplace. Flat hierarchies improve communication flow by fostering transparency, reducing bureaucracy, and encouraging direct engagement among employees. However, larger organizations face challenges in maintaining consistency and clarity in communication due to increased complexity.

Despite the benefits, flat hierarchies present challenges such as role ambiguity and cultural resistance, especially in traditional and rural settings. These obstacles highlight the need for organizations to blend flat structures with adaptive communication strategies that respect cultural norms. Digital tools play a vital role in bridging communication gaps in flat hierarchies by enabling real-time collaboration and enhancing information accessibility. However, their effectiveness depends on employee digital literacy and infrastructure availability, which vary across industries and regions.

Employees generally perceive communication in flat hierarchies as more open and collaborative. However, in some contexts, such as highly regulated industries, perceptions of effectiveness are tempered by the need to comply with formal reporting structures. Organizational size, industry type, and cultural context significantly influence communication dynamics in flat hierarchies. Smaller organizations and creative industries adapt more effectively to flat structures, while traditional cultural attitudes in some Nigerian regions pose challenges to egalitarian communication practices.

This study underscores the need for organizations in Nigeria to tailor flat hierarchy models to their unique operational, cultural, and industrial contexts. Hybrid structures that combine the benefits of flat hierarchies with the clarity of traditional reporting lines may be an optimal solution. Additionally, investment in digital infrastructure and employee training can enhance communication effectiveness across various organizational setups. Flat hierarchies offer immense potential to revolutionize communication in Nigerian organizations, fostering innovation and inclusivity. However, their implementation requires thoughtful adaptation to organizational and cultural realities, ensuring sustainable and effective communication practices in a rapidly evolving workplace environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Implement hybrid communication structures that combine the benefits of flat hierarchies with elements of traditional hierarchies, particularly in large organizations.

2. Develop clear communication guidelines and role definitions to reduce ambiguity and ensure efficiency.

3. Provide communication training programs for employees and managers to adapt to the dynamics of flat hierarchies.

4. Establish feedback mechanisms to identify and address communication gaps in real-time.

5. Adopt user-friendly and context-appropriate digital communication platforms tailored to the organization's needs.

6. Regularly evaluate employee perceptions through surveys and feedback sessions, addressing concerns promptly.

7. Smaller organizations and creative industries should fully embrace flat hierarchies to leverage their agility and innovation potential.

8. In culturally diverse environments, develop customized communication strategies that respect local norms while encouraging progressive practices.

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