

Case Study 3

Internal Communication at the University of Aruba

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The Case¹

The University of Aruba (UA) is a small-scale educational institute located in Oranjestad, the capital of Aruba. Approximately 700 students attend higher education at the UA. The University is relatively young: the present University was founded in 1988 and originally occupied one building. The UA has recently gone through a phase of rapid development: personnel quadrupled and the organization now consists of almost 100 full-time employees. This development called for substantial changes, including the introduction of new online communication platforms such as an intranet system for communication among staff (InSite), an application for student record-keeping (Osiris) and a virtual learning environment (EDU20), and the opening of new facilities, including a remote new administrative building. The University now occupies three buildings and is home to four faculties that together offer nine degree programmes and several certificate programmes in the humanities and social sciences. Its dense organizational chart illustrates the complexity of the organization (Figure 3.1). One of the UA's most pressing needs is to develop more degree programmes for international and local students in the near future, and to give back to society by doing so. On its website, the UA formulates its mission as: "Serving the Aruban community with knowledge" (University of Aruba, 2016).

Aruba, the smallest of the three ABC islands in the Caribbean, lies just off the coast of Venezuela with a population of 109,028 (CBS Aruba, 2015). The island, which is part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, has two official languages since 2003, Dutch and Papiamentu (Leuverink, 2011). Its inhabitants are generally multilingual and speak, in varying combinations, the dominant languages Papiamentu, Dutch, Spanish and English (CBS Aruba, 2010). Dutch is the traditional language of administration, but English is gaining ground in public usage and enjoys high prestige (Bamberger, 2016). Papiamentu is spoken in the majority of people's homes (CBS Aruba, 2010).

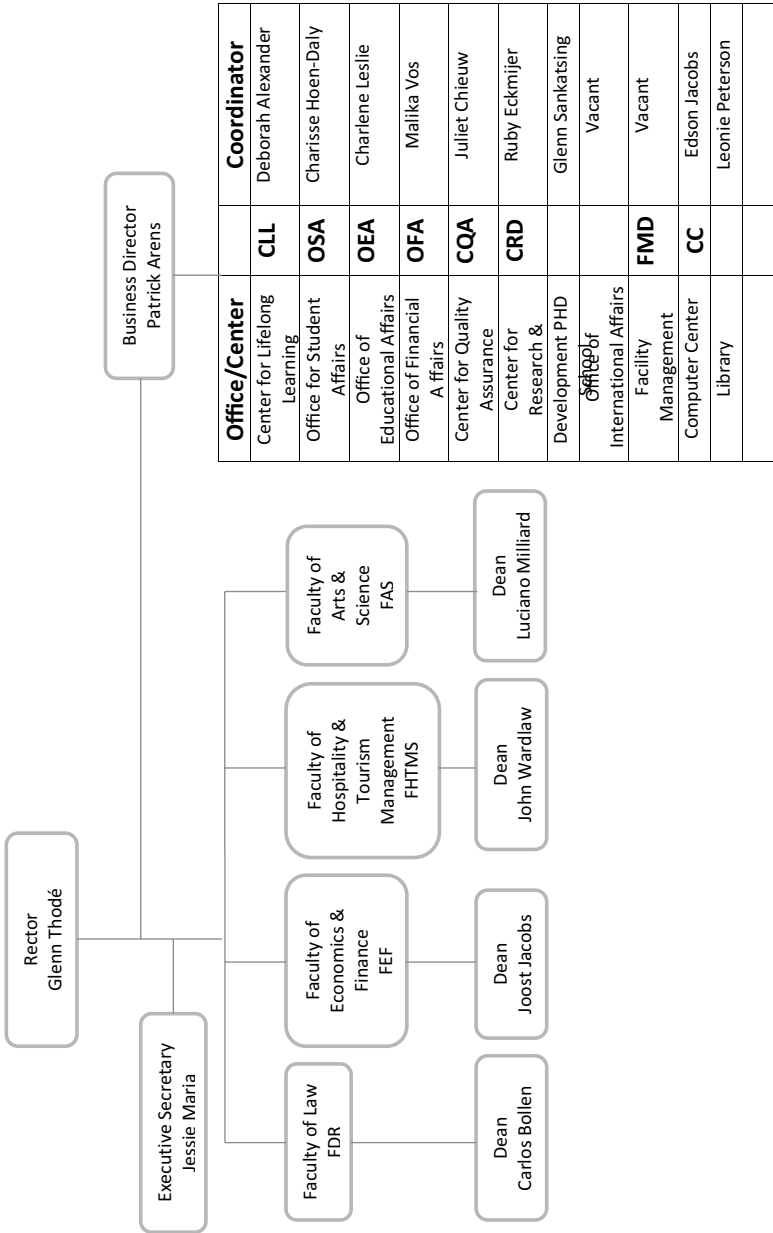


Figure 3.1 Organization Chart of the UA

Although Spanish is quite popular in Aruba, recent research has shown that it mostly enjoys covert prestige among its speakers and that the Arubans' overall image of Spanish immigrants is rather negative (Carroll, 2015).

At the University of Aruba, the languages of instruction are Dutch and English; both languages are used for internal and external administrative communication, but there is a clear preference for English. The UA management indicated that, as a result of its recent growth, it is experiencing a need for change in internal and external communication strategy. Communication problems between organizational clusters, as well as the observation that external communication lacks uniformity and consistency, prompted the UA early in 2016 to appoint an advisory Communication Board (CB) to investigate these issues and formulate a clear communication plan. The small-scale organization of a decade ago allowed for informal, short internal communication lines. In the present, larger organization these informal communication practices may lead to a loss of efficiency and irritation as there is no uniformity in communication practices. The goal of the CB is to streamline internal and external communication of the UA. The CB consists of a selection of lecturers, two management representatives, a journalist, two social media experts, and a communication intern. By means of regular meetings, the current communicational situation at the UA is evaluated, and possible solutions for ongoing issues are discussed. The researcher's role in this process, as an intern at the CB of the UA, was to investigate the current state of *internal communication*, to *gather input from the work floor*, and *thus to inventorize bottlenecks*. If the communication problems are solved, the UA will be able to accomplish its goal and mission more efficiently. Considering the previous comments, the following main research question was formulated: What are the bottlenecks of the UA's internal communication strategies and practices and what are its employees' experiences and expectations?

To be able to answer the main research question, the following sub-questions were used:

1. What communication channels are used, and what is the employee experience with regard to these channels?
2. To what extent is communication between communicational clusters problematic?
3. In what ways can internal communication at the University of Aruba be improved?

The Research Process

In addition to a preparatory literature review, two methods were used in the present study: interviews and participant observation. Both methods will be described separately. Most data were retrieved from the interviews. Data

from participant observation were predominantly used to support statements derived from interview data. The literature will be briefly summarized first.

Literature Review

Communication studies has proved to be relevant for people on an interpersonal level, but it is of great importance at an organizational level as well (Downs & Adrian, 2012). Especially internal communication is among the fastest-expanding fields of research into organizational communication and management studies (Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012). In times of organizational change, improving internal communication appears to be the key to success, as it improves employee engagement and has positive organizational outcomes in general (Proctor & Doukakis, 2003; Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2015). For organizations aiming to improve internal communication, it is important to know how to assess the communication processes. This can, for instance, be done by means of a communication audit. Communication audits can be implemented in several ways, including interviews, questionnaires, focus groups or panels. The CB described earlier is an example of a panel (Hogendoorn, 2003). Combinations of these methods are recommended (Hogendoorn, 2003) as combining methodologies ensures triangulation, which increases a study's validity (Dörnyei, 2007).

Participant Observation

Three meetings in Dutch of the CB were observed by the intern. Notes, also in Dutch, were made during the meetings and directly after. Meetings began with a short announcement of the topics that were to be discussed. The researcher did not have influence on these topics. The participants that were observed are the members of the CB: lecturers, two management representatives, a journalist and two social media experts. These participants were observed in varying combinations, depending on who was present during each meeting. Table 3.1 lists the observed meetings.

Table 3.1 Overview of Observed Meetings

	<i>Date</i>	<i>Attendees</i>
Meeting 1	29 March 2016	Complete CB
Meeting 2	19 April 2016	Complete CB
Meeting 3	10 May 2016	Journalist Social media experts

Interviews

Answers to the present study's research questions were mainly gathered by means of interviews and interview analysis. A number of participants were invited for face-to-face interviews with a semi-structured design. Choosing to conduct interviews with a semi-structured approach will guarantee that all topics of interest are covered in the interview, while at the same time enabling the interviewee to elaborate on topics that the researcher had not foreseen (Dörnyei, 2007).

Participants

The participants for the interviews were chosen after several meetings with the Communication Board of the UA. The business director and a lecturer suggested several participants, after which the intern decided who to approach. As some of the suggested respondents were unavailable, the number of interviewees was raised by means of a snow-ball method. To ensure that different organizational, and hence communicational, clusters were represented in the present study, three categories were distinguished: Management, Education and Support. Table 3.2 shows the participants per category.

Materials

Before the interviews, a topic list was created in preparation. According to Baarda, de Goede, and van der Hulst (2012), topic lists are essential for structured, semi-structured and non-structured interviews, as keeping a topic list in mind guarantees that all relevant topics are covered. The questions were connected to the main topics of research. The interviews began with general questions about the participant's background and position within the organization, after which an inventory of communication channels and participant experience were discussed. Subsequently, the topic changed to participant

Table 3.2 List of Participants

	<i>Category</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Interview language</i>	<i>Country of birth</i>	<i>Gender</i>
1	Management	M1	Dutch	NL	M
2		M2	Dutch	AR	M
3	Education	E1	Dutch	NL	F
4		E2	Dutch	AR	M
5	Support	S1	Dutch	AR	F
6		S2	Dutch	AR	F

experience with these channels and focused on the participant's opinion with regard to improving the channels.

Apart from the topic list, a combined invitation and informed consent document was prepared. The participants received a personal e-mail inviting them for an interview regarding internal communication. The informed consent form was attached to these e-mails and included a summary of the topic. Additionally, the document contained statements regarding privacy. For example, the interviewees were informed of the necessity to record the interviews and of the fact that the information that was shared would be anonymized and treated confidentially.

Procedure

The interviews were mostly held in the participants' offices in May and June 2016. If this was not possible, the researcher arranged an empty office or classroom. In this way, the interviews could be conducted in a quiet environment, which was beneficial to both the conversational quality as well as to the quality of the recordings. The interviews could be held in either English or Dutch, depending on the preference of the interviewee. In the end, all participants chose Dutch. Therefore, all quotations in the present chapter were translated into English by the researcher. The researcher attempted to keep to a set order in which the topics were discussed, but maintained a flexible attitude throughout the conversation. In general, the researcher made use of Baarda et al.'s (2012, p. 33) main structure, in which all interviews start with a short introduction to the topic. Subsequently, an opening question was formulated. All interviews began with the same question, after which the topics from the topic list were discussed one by one. This was the part of the interview that required flexibility, as interviewees occasionally brought up valuable points at unexpected times. Freedom to elaborate on these points was given and the possibility to deviate from the original structure was essential in this case. In the end, the researcher gave her impression of the situation, and the participants were asked whether they thought the researcher's analysis was correct and were given the opportunity to share their insights as well. Finally, the interviewee was thanked and the privacy statements as given in the combined invitation and informed consent document were stressed. The interviewees were able to express their interest in the research outcomes and could ask for the final outcomes if they so desired.

The interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were recorded with the researcher's mobile phone. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed using the programme Express Scribe. It must be noted that some parts of the conversation were private or irrelevant and were therefore left out of the transcript. Some statements that were too revealing in terms of privacy had to be erased.

Results

By combining the results from the research methods, it was possible to outline the problems and identify causes. By defining problems, it became easier to find fitting solutions. First the research questions will be answered, after which the advice will be formulated.

1. What communication channels are used, and what is the employee experience with regard to these channels?

Answers of the interviewees pertaining to the first sub-question were relatively similar, regardless of what group (support staff, education or management) the participants belonged to. The main communication channels that were mentioned were the intranet, e-mail and a variety of social media, though user experience varied. Overall, the mediums that are used at the UA function in the sense that they are operative, though adjustment or regulations are needed. One of the most frequently mentioned mediums of communication was the intranet system InSite. All respondents mentioned InSite, but there was a difference in usage between Management and the other categories. Management not only uses InSite to report their own activities but also to approve requests and reports by their staff. Interviews with supporting staff and educational staff indicated one main problem: even though employees are encouraged by Management and HR to open InSite daily, they do not feel the need to do so, as InSite lacks regular content updates. E-mail was often mentioned as a main means of internal communication. It appears to be used for a variety of messages. It was said that e-mails are used for mass communication (invitations for events, minutes) as well as individual messages. Overall, e-mail was viewed as logically present. Most respondents were positive or neutral about using e-mail, except for one respondent from Management, who stated that there is a proliferation of e-mails. It was striking that UA employees feel they are expected to e-mail in English. Employees used to e-mail in either Dutch, Papiamentu or English. However, since the UA has grown, and employs more international staff, the language practice has changed to English to avoid misunderstandings. Surprisingly, perhaps, respondents indicated that, after a short transitional phase, the recent change does not cause any problems. Social media were not used often in internal communication. In general, participants indicated that they do not use social media for internal communication, apart from gathering information from Facebook events occasionally. When asked about the UA's website, respondents stated that they do not use it often for internal communication. On rare occasions it is used to find information concerning specific programmes such as partnerships with other universities.

2. *To what extent is communication between communicational clusters problematic?*

When asked about communication between the clusters, management, educational staff, supporting staff and faculties, interviewees pointed to three central issues. First of all, it appears that most problems originate from an increase in steps that have to be taken to bring information across. This could possibly be related to the recent growth of the UA. This growth has resulted in lines of communication growing longer. Respondents pointed out that this has made communication between all clusters more complex, and that employees are still getting used to new practices, and finding out what to communicate to whom. To fully understand the situation, it is vital to know that many communication practices at the UA are created ad hoc, on a need-driven basis. Respondents also indicated that there is a wish to streamline the organization again, as the quick growth caused the UA's former structure to disintegrate. The increase in student service offices and centres has led to confusion among employees. The opening of a remote administrative location resulted in a dichotomy between employees working in the main building and those who work at the new, remote location. Most respondents stated that, although the new location is necessary, the two buildings are two completely different worlds, which creates a division between employees. Moreover, those who do not work at the main building feel like second-class citizens. The second issue that stands out is that communication between faculties is most problematic, although it seems to be improving. Most respondents stated that the faculties appear to be little islands run according to their own rules. There appears to be some rivalry between faculties, as each of them wants to maintain their own identity. For example, the Faculty of Law is the only faculty with an academic accreditation and the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Management Studies is the only faculty that follows the US education system in the sense that grading and credits differ from the European system, as used by the other faculties. Third, most respondents expressed a preference for informal over formal communication. All respondents mentioned that they were used to communicating informally with one another in the hallways. This was perceived as more fruitful than hearing information through formal channels.

3. *In what ways can internal communication at the UA be improved?*

Even though not all respondents could name one major cause for problems at the UA, they all had suggestions for improvement. Suggestions for adjustments and improvements can generally be divided in two categories. On the one hand, respondents offered practical, small-scaled solutions. On the

other hand, major, substantial solutions were proposed. The need for InSite updates was often mentioned. Updates would encourage employees to open InSite daily. Moreover, there is a general desire to know when new staff arrives, and when staff members leave. Furthermore, InSite is felt to be not flexible. For instance, the system does not include an option to change earlier posts. The respondents pointed to Human Resources, who own the tool, to add more information regarding incoming and outgoing staff and fix InSite's inflexibilities. Several respondents also mentioned the abundance of meetings between clusters that are held. It was also said that the meetings that are held are not always effective; people discuss many irrelevant, personal issues during meetings. Several respondents mentioned that there was a plan to make a public bulletin after each meeting, in addition to private minutes, to inform the other clusters of what had been discussed. These plans were never executed. Some respondents also thought it might be helpful to merge all faculties into one.

Consultancy and Acceptance

All in all, the UA's difficulties in internal communication are caused by an increase of employees and students. An extra location was opened to meet the need for more space, but the physical and mental distance between the two locations creates a gap between employees. On top of that, the additional layers between communication clusters resulted in information being lost and projects delayed. Furthermore, lines of communication grew longer. Based on the research, the following points, mentioned by the respondents, are important in the UA's transformation to a larger, professional organization:

- To reduce the dichotomy between the two locations, it is important to focus on both long-term solutions, such as finding a building closer to the central one, as well as on an equal distribution of events over both buildings.
- To meet the demands for straightforward communication, student service offices and centres need to be streamlined to keep employees from working on the same task without being aware of this.
- Merging all faculties into one might be useful, but this should not be a priority, as not all faculties are ready for the change.
- InSite should become a more flexible, pro-active platform that offers more information regarding staff members.

In addition to the advice as formulated by the respondents, the following points were formulated by the researcher as additional advice:

- Where the UA could first depend on informal communication, the organization now needs to adapt to the more formal approach to communication a larger organization calls for.
- Additionally, information sessions regarding updates on the expansion of facilities and buildings could be organized. This would show employees that management is aware of the issue and is actively attempting to solve it.
- InSite could be used as an interactive platform where staff can reflect on changes and communication problems. Questionnaires or polls could be used to gather additional information in this respect.

The preceding advice was presented to the business director of the UA in a final meeting. He indicated that some of these points are on the UA's agenda already. For example, the UA is currently negotiating the use of a building nearby.

Final Reflection

Contrary to the researcher's original expectations, the problems seem to have originated from the growth of the organization rather than from the multicultural society of which it is a part. For instance, multilingual communication, or the change to writing all e-mails in English, does not appear to have had negative consequences for internal communication at the UA. It is the style of communication (formal versus informal) rather than the choice of language that causes problems. The researcher initially focused on finding miscommunication between cultures in the more traditional sense of the word, but discovered that intercultural differences between organizations (such as small organizations versus large organizations) should be taken into account as well.

Note

- 1 This chapter is based on applied research conducted by Fardau Bamberger in the context of her research internship with the University of Aruba (April–July 2016, supervised by Eric Mijts and Roselinde Supheert) and the resulting internship report.

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