Digital Communication Techniques Used for Employee Relations During Covid-19 Lockdown in Select Universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States

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Abstract

This study examined the digital communication techniques used for employee relations during Covid-19 lockdown in select universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States. The objectives of the study were among others to find out digital communication techniques used in the universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown in employee relations. The research design adopted in this study was the analytical descriptive survey design. The population of the study was 20,605 teaching staff and non-teaching staff of selected universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States. The sample size was 380 and 374 was used for analysis. The multi-stage sampling technique was used for the study to select the respondents. The instruments of this study were questionnaire and interview guide with reliability co-efficient of 0.78 determined, using Pearson formula and the data analysis was done using mean, standard deviation and rank order. Findings from the study revealed that digital remarks, asynchronous communication, communication consistent, clarity and brevity, making every message count, precise communication and continuous communication quality were the digital communication techniques employed in universities under study during Covid-19 lockdown in Rivers and Bayelsa States among others. The study summarised that technology is an essential tool to offer in employees' relations because of its benefits such as delivery of timely information, enhancement of employee relations activities and empowerment, increase of organizational transparency. The study recommended that the universities should embrace digital communication techniques such as digital remarks, clarity and brevity, a synchronous communication which are positive and appropriate for employee relations during tough times as Covid-19 lockdown.

Keywords: Digital, communication techniques, employee relations, Covid-19, lockdown

Introduction

The year 2020 has brought unprecedented changes to the global economy and the world of work. On the 11th of March, the World Health Organisation (WHO) characterised the novel coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic, and urged governments around the world to take matters seriously and prepare for the first wave of the public health emergency with several drastic measures, one of which was the nationwide lockdowns in many countries (WHO, 2020). As the lockdowns or stay-at-home measures entered into force, a large proportion of the workforce was instructed to stay home and continue to work remotely - if their functions make it possible. Organisations that were previously familiar with teleworking, as well as organisations that haven't experimented with teleworking before, were sending their employees home, creating the conditions for the most extensive mass teleworking (digital communication) experiment in history. Though the number of people teleworking part-time or on a full-time basis has been gradually increasing over the years (Eurostat, 2018), the pandemic has certainly fast-tracked the adoption of digital communication modalities by employers.

In a scenario such as the COVID-19 pandemic, digital communication has proven itself an important aspect of ensuring business continuity, reduced commuting time, increased opportunity for workers to focus on their work tasks away from the distractions of the office, as well as an opportunity for better work-life balance. Digital communication in an organisation or workplace offers the opportunity for a more flexible schedule for workers and the freedom to work from an alternative location, away from the premise of the employer. There may also be risks, such as isolation (particularly for individuals living alone), and the loss of contact with fellow employees, which it is essential to anticipate and prevent (Ufuophu & Agobami, 2012).

Today, the organisation especially, universities are changing in relation to the global pandemic of COVID-19. For an organisation, one of the conditions that constrain the stakeholder paradigm is the dynamism of the highly competitive business environment which affects operational processes, policy framework, market and competition, human and material resources. By implication, the changing corporate environment is the anticipation of unusually perplexing situations by corporate organisations time and again. It equally suggests that corporate organisations need to develop methods that can functionally respond to events and times. The articulation of certain management strategies without careful and continuous stakeholders' relations and profiling could make such strategies illusive in the face of the unexpected. This is because of the significance of relating different stakeholders of an organisation and their differing opinions in the organisation and its operation (Alikor, 2016). However, without digital communication channels and employees whose interests can affect or be affected by the activities of an organisation, it will be pretty difficult to assess the management strategies that could promote mutual understanding and cooperation with such groups.

As strange as it sounds, some organisations have a habit of making it difficult for people to complete their work. Bureaucracy, out of date tools, working in silos, poor communication, and hard-to-find information can lead to employee frustration and poor productivity. A positive employee experience requires removing friction from day-to-day work and digital communication techniques have a big part to play in ensuring employees are able to work better and faster. Employees want to be able to collaborate with people faster, access accurate information more rapidly, and get their work done more efficiently. By facilitating easy access to information and

people, digital communication and platforms like digital workplaces make it much easier for employees to be productive and get their work done. Organisations can create and reinforce a shared purpose and values. The purpose of an organisation should be an inspirational driver that drives all organisational activities- policy, structure, innovation, processes, performance, and change (Abudunrin, 2013). Having a compelling purpose sets a higher standard of excellence for organisations, motivates employees to join to attract customers who love what the organisation is doing. It is that engagement that ultimately impacts a company health and bottom line.

In a global environment with multiple teams and a dispersed workplace, organisational silos can negatively impact your business success, especially easy for department in the absence of digital tools and technologies. It is inaccessible to the rest of the company when they do not have a place to share it. A digital workplace can change all of that. Digital communication techniques are great. Enabling employees to interact and share ideas can build a sense of community and trust, encourage innovation, and solve problems in real-time. Digital communication techniques are a great way to break down communication barriers in order to transfer the employees relations, experience all promote innovation and growth. It would be in the best interest of organisations to focus on digital communication within the organisations, which may bestow the organisation with many benefits. Digital communication is vital for both the organisation and for its day-to-day existence. Digital communication techniques have the power to engage employees within the organisation and allow the organisation to work in a more successful fashion (Kingsnorth, 2016). The question remains, however, how management is responsible for ensuring that communication occurs within the organisation and that its effectiveness is evaluated appropriately. The more transparent an organisation is, the more widely its internal information is shared. Digital communication is a vital aspect of how relationships between the organisation and its employees are evaluated, which means that open communication indicates a stronger relationship.

There is a huge need to communicate consistently and clearly in order to achieve relationship; digital communication is considered crucial for achieving employee relationship. Communication between management and employees and reliable information sharing is critical in promoting a sense of commitment and belonging as well as helping employees to successfully understand the goals of the organisation. Various digital communication strategies can be employed by organisations to relate with employees such as employee engagement and empowerment, employees able to work better and faster, create and reinforce a shared purpose and values by organisations, remote working and a collaborative culture to drive success from management. Employee relationship and trust between employees may be key results of successful digital communication. A positive employee attitude can be formed early and within the confinement of the organisation itself through the use of digital communication. This provides evidence that there is a need for management to use effective digital communication with their employees in order to become a trusted source of information for internal stakeholders. What this means is that effective digital communication and employee relations can actually endear the reputation of an organisation of an organisation, reduce management employee conflicts and forestall the escalation of conflicts (Abudunrin, 2013).

In the current information age, digital communication plays a crucial role in improving, teaching, learning, research and administrative processes. The use of digital communication tools

in governance/administration can be referred to as e-governance/e-administration. With emergence of technology and growing demand of the society, e-administration is widely applied by the developed nations with no chance of a stopping point in the near future to better serve their citizens through efficient and effective services, with accountability and transparency. In developing countries, the adoption of digital communication tools in university institutions is happening at a slow pace. Its use in administration is nothing to write home about. This has many reasons, from missing infrastructure to security concerns to lecturers not being familiar enough with using digital communication tools in regular classes. Most institutions are still running paper-based administration while others have deployed shallow automation of their administrative transactions. When appropriately applied, e–administration can effectively ensure the well-being of a university for improved and effective education and administration service delivery, conforming to regulations as per the university statutes and acts. Good deployment and sustainability of digital communication techniques in educational institution requires staff and students to be computer literate.

The ICT-centre is responsible for the smooth running and management of the ICT facilities. Countries must establish the right policy interventions, resource investments, appropriate networks (partnerships) and enabling environment for the application of digital communication for employee relations to thrive. This work will serve as an excellent guide to stakeholders, University administrators, employee relations and the foundation for establishing a viable and sustainable ICT inspired learning and resource management. A successful implementation of ICT enabled University administration will deliver information services 24 by 7 that strengthens University's drive towards effective administration, employees relations, increased transparency, and better management of resources. How these digital communication techniques have been deployed by management to create employee relations and trust will be the primary concern of this study. The thrust of this study is to examine the digital communication techniques and how they are utilised to enhance employee relations in universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown

Statement of the problem

The impact of Covid-19 pandemic is of immense research interest. The Covid-19 lockdown has shaken everybody's life, at work sphere; it has shaken the relationship to work, time, space and form for a large part of workers. During this Covid-19 lockdown, the universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States adopted working remotely, away from the traditional facilities to maintain a link to the office and employees. This involves telecommuting, working from home, teleworking, mobile work, flexi place, satellite office, detached units, distance meetings or virtual organisations. For employee relations, it helps productivity, profitability and flexibility and improvement in remote collaboration. Digital communication tools such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram were shown to enhance communication and access to information through networks such as intranet, internal and external platforms. It positively affects knowledge sharing which contribute to improving workers' skills and employee relations within teams and help reduce social isolation that can enhance employee relations, job satisfaction and productivity.

Nevertheless, the lack of cooperation and team spirit, decrease timeliness of work completion, risk of employees' cyber lacking, managerial, administrative problems to implement digital communication techniques for enhancement of employee activities are the challenges of

teleworking or remote working during the Covid-19 lockdown. Also, various drawbacks like the increase in time pressure, workload, and a potential misuse of digital communication tools can generate information overload and be detrimental to employee relations. The way digital communication techniques are diffused on employee relations during the Covid-19 lockdown period needs to be known in order to harness more from employees in creating working environment to satisfy the needs of employees as well as the management of the universities. It is apparent that employees are the major valuable assets of an organisation in which without them, it is hard to realise its basic objectives. Therefore, this study was set out to investigate the digital communication techniques used for employee relations during the Covid-19 lockdown in select universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States.

Objectives of the study

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. find out digital communication techniques used in the universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown in employee relations,
2. ascertain the ways digital communication techniques are deployed in employee relations activities in universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown,
3. examine the benefits derived from digital communication techniques in employee relations activities in universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown,
4. identify challenges in the use of digital communication techniques for employee relations in universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown.

Literature Review

Digital Techniques

A digital technique is a planned approach that uses online platforms and digital data to fulfil strategic communication (including marketing, advertising, and public relations) goals (Chaffey & Smith, 2013). It involves data-driven decision-making and planning process where managers select interactive technologies or platforms for an organisation's or client's specific campaign or overall communication program. Several different software programs such as mobile applications, social media platforms, as well as online data sources that come from websites all make up a digital technique. Software programs can include custom software created for that particular organisation to measure real-time analytics, social listening, or help with data management (Geuvrin, 2016). A social media platform refers to an existing site that an organisation uses, similar to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or WhatsApp. Finally, online data sources such as website, landing pages, or web browser history can be sources of data for digital strategies. All organisations have digital strategies including non-profit organisations, activist organisations, political parties, and for-profit organisations; however, the formality of the digital strategies varies (Overland, 2016).

Components of Digital Technique

A digital technique includes several different components. Broadly, these components can be thought of as (a) preparatory, (b) enacting, and (c) evaluating. Preparatory components of a digital technique include research and planning for a digital campaign or overall communication program for an organisation. Then components for enacting a digital communication campaign or program consider the tactical elements available to strategic communicators to engage with or reach primary stakeholders or stake seekers (Overland, 2016). The enacting components of a digital technique

concurrently include the use of real-time data to inform decisions about distributing messages digitally. Finally, evaluative components to a digital technique include the use of analytics and metrics in a reflective manner to inform future campaigns or alter on-going communication programs.

Covid-19 Lockdown Focus on Digitalisation

Digitalisation is defined as a socio-technical evolving process that takes place at the individual, organisational, societal, and global levels (Legner *et al*, 2017) and across all sectors. It refers to the use of tools converting analogue information into digital information. Digitalisation includes a complex array of technologies, some of which are still at their early stages of development and use. In the context of work and the workplace, digitalisation in its current form refers to the increased presence and use of cloud computing and scheduling tools, as well as web-based applications across different platforms to facilitate remote access and collaborative work. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the pace of digitalisation has quickened, the adoption of digital technologies by enterprises has led to an increased opportunity for workers to carry on working from home. Digitalisation was already leading to significant changes in the way employment and workplaces are organised, with potentially substantial implications for skill requirements, labour standards, and workers' wellbeing (ILO, 2019). Digitalisation however is not evenly spread across the globe, with certain regions struggling with the lack of broadband, internet connection and available ICT tools to enable teleworking. For example, only a quarter of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa has access to the internet and only half in the Maghreb, compared to four-fifths in Europe (ILO, 2019). In the countries where regular power cuts and weak internet service makes even sending an e-mail a challenge, teleworking is practically impossible without the specific support of the employer, in terms of purchasing hardware and providing broadband.

Empirical Review

Madueke, et al., (2017) carried a survey on challenges and prospects of implementing E-Administration in Nigeria: An explanatory discourse. The word is gradually moving from what it used to be a digital world. The information and communication technology wave is fast blowing across virtually every aspect of the society. If properly utilized, ICT can be a veritable tool in enhancing transparency and efficient service delivery in both private and public sectors administration. This paper is an explanatory discourse on the prospects of implementing Electronics Administration in Nigeria and some of the drawbacks to it. Alarming ICT illiteracy rate, epileptic power supply, high cost of purchasing computer gadgets, cyber-crime and lack of adequate manpower were among others identified as the major challenges to e administration in Nigeria. This paper suggested mass ICT education, establishment of e administration implementation committees in both federal and state ministries and parastatals, the establishment of ministry for ICT Affairs, provision of necessary ICT infrastructures and cyber security as the panacea to the challenges confronting e administration in Nigeria. As a regional power, Nigeria should be at lead in embracing the dividends of ICT. Technological Determinism Theory was adopted to explain the effects of technology on administration. The reviewed study and the current study are similar as both studies focus on implementing e-administration. But while the reviewed study focused on the challenges and prospects of implementing e-administration in Nigeria, the

current study focuses on digital communication techniques used for employee relations during Covid-19 lockdown in select universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States. The dissimilarity is on the methodological approaches and scope.

Itighise and Akpaetor (2014) carried a research on digital media and information dissemination in university institutions in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria**.** This study digital Media and Information Dissemination in University Institutions Akwa lbom State. Nigeria sought to determine the extent to which electronic media (e-mail, voice-mail, picture message. and live calls) influence organisational communication in university institutions in the study area. The study adopted the descriptive survey design. Four specify objectives, and a research question were raised and translated into a research hypothesis for testing at .05 level of significance. Conceptual and empirical review of literature indicated that digital media is likely to affect organisation communication among staff of university institutions at horizontal and vertical communication patterns. A researcher made instrument called Digital Media Interaction Scale (DMIS) with reliability coefficient of .87 using cronbach Alpha was 752 respondents representing 10% of the study population was used. They were select using stratified and random sampling techniques where the five governments owned university educational institutions in the study area formed strata. Data collected were analysed using percentages and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The results show that digital communication media have significant influence, ensure more effective and transactional organisational communication at diverse degrees of intensity and reach depending on authority structure and line staff within the institutions examined. Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended among others that staff of university academic institutions should be encouraged to use digital communication media to boost effective and efficient communication. The reviewed study and the current study are related as both studies focus on digital media dissemination in education institutions. But differs in methodological approaches and in scope, the reviewed study hinged on digital media and information dissemination in university institutions in Akwa-Ibom State, the current study hinges on digital communication techniques used for employee relations during Covid-19 lockdown in select universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States.

Hult and Brystrom (2021) carried a research on challenges to learning and leading the digital workplace. Digitalisation does not only transform material constructions of workplaces and work but also social constructions for employees' interaction and learning at work. The study explored emerging challenges related to the digitalisation of workplaces aiming for an understanding of the changing prerequisites for working and competence. Our findings from a small qualitative exploratory study illustrate the complexity of the development of workplaces, characterised by strong but diffuse relationships between people, technology, and work practices. The study argued that in the development of digital workplaces, a sole focus on information systems as new technology, along with training and education of their functionality is insufficient. First, the demand for new competencies in the workplace calls for understanding learning practices in everyday digital work. Second, leading the transition towards a digital workplace requires learning new leadership practices. Thus, an understanding of work rather than systems ought to be central in the future digitalisation of work, in which the systems are one part of development, not the development. The reviewed study and the current study are related as both focus on the digital workplace. But whereas the reviewed study focused on challenges to learning and leading the

digital workplace, the current study focus on digital communication techniques used for employee relations during Covid-19 lockdown in select universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States. The dissimilarity is on the scope and methods.

Theoretical Frameworks

Adaptive Structural Theory (AST)

Our theoretical background to better capture under what conditions the digitally transformed home office can improve teleworkers' job well-being and job productivity is based on the Adaptive Structural Theory (AST) developed by DeSanctis and Poole in 1994. This theory looks at how the technology is designed and how the technology is used and interpreted by the end user. Despite it was originally a group level analysis theory, we argue it is also relevant for an individual level of analysis. It goes beyond the technocentric view of technology use (Rioe & Leonardi, 2013) in which the technology has a determining role in predicting changes inside companies and the human centric perspective in which individuals' interpretations and agency are only considered (Zammuto, et al., 2013). In the AST perspective, individuals, and organisations using technology for their work dynamically create perceptions about the role and utility of the technology, and how it can be applied to their activities. These perceptions can vary widely across individuals and organisations. They influence how digital tools are used and appraised and consequently mediate their impact on individuals and organisations outcomes.

However, during this period of imposed distancing, home office was subject to two forms of appropriation: an appropriation corresponding to the sharing out pattern (DeVaujany, 1999) where the tool is seen as a means of exchange with others, and an appropriation of continuity of activity, centred on the activities to be maintained. In 2020, the constraint to adopt new digital tools during the lockdown periods was external and put managers and employees in the same boat, which may ease the transition (Wade & Shan, 2020). Sutan and Vranceanu (2020) show indeed that individuals are willing to make more efforts easily and even accept a more unequal sharing of the benefits achieved, if constraints come from people outside their group. For employees, the lockdown is itself an external constraint, like a diffuse scapegoat and to which employees cannot blame. In other circumstances, employees might have been reluctant to work in a digitally transformed work environment while feeling a constraint on the part of their management.

The theory is relevant to this study because it offers an explanation for the use and effects of digital communication for the use in organisation. It also focuses on the dynamic relationship between the structural provided by digital communication that is document, information sharing and the ways in which those structures are used by the employees. The outcomes of digital communication use in employee relations are ultimately contingent upon the way in which structures are appropriates. This shows that structures in technology and structures in employee relations action are continually intertwined, continuously shaping each other.

System Theory

Von Bertalanffy is said to be the one that gave the fullest formulation of a general theory of systems. He is generally regarded as the father of the systems theory. The system theory is said to be one of the contemporary approaches to organisational communication. It sees an organisation as a system (made up of subsystems) within a larger or super system (that is the larger society). The theory therefore focuses on issues of synergy, interdependently and interconnections within an organisation and between the organisation and the danger environment (Laszlo & Krippner,

2013). The system theory (like the situation theory) has been described as a theory of relationship as it gives us a way of thinking about relationships within organisations and between organisations and their larger environment, such relationships can be initiated and managed through effective internal communication. This means that communication mechanisms must be in place for the organisational system to exchange relevant information within and with its environment. It is the duty of the management to monitor relationships within and outside organisations. This duty is called boundary spanning.

Relating this theory to the study, the theory holds that organisations have recognisable boundaries within which there must be a digital communication techniques that guides the practices of the organisation (universities) to achieve employee relations. According to the theory, the onus lies on the management of the organisation to create and maintain these digital communication techniques structures. These employee relations may refer to an effective management communication practice established by organisations. The systems theory provides a powerful method for the description of homeostatic systems, that is, systems in which feedback-controlled regulation processes occur. Since employee relations goal-directed behaviour is regulated by such processes, system theory is also that organisations are composed of many subsystems that are not necessarily related to one another and get work together to form the whole. The theory is helpful during the Covid-19 lockdown for understanding things like digital communication, organisational behaviour, organisational change, employee relations and organisational development. Hence, the theory allows employees to be more effective digital communicators because it focuses employees and management from looking so narrowly at a problem to expanding views to the whole situation. The theory gives a wholistic viewpoint to interpersonal communication.

Methodology

The research design adopted for this study was descriptive survey. The choice of the descriptive survey research design was informed by the need to evaluate digital communication techniques used for employee relations during Covid-19 lockdown in select universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States. The population of this study consisted of the management and staff (employees) of University of Port Harcourt (Uniport) Port Harcourt, Rivers State University (RSU) Port Harcourt, Federal University (FUO) Otuoke, and Niger Delta University (NDU), Amasoma. Information sourced from the office of the Registrar of each of the institutions indicated the population as summarized in the table below:

Table 1 Population of the study

Institutions	Management	Academic staff	Non-academic staff	Total
UNIPORT	8	1,520	4,234	5,942
RSU	10	1,304	3,612	4,926
FUO	8	1,428	3,983	5,419
NDU	7	1,285	3,026	4,318
Total population	33	5,537	14,855	20,605

Hence, the population for this study stood at 20,605 (twenty thousand, six hundred and five).

A total of 380 respondents formed the sample size for this study. The sample size was based on the sampling system developed by Keyton (2001). The study adopted the multi-stage

cluster sampling. The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire which was administered on management and staff (employees) of the universities in Rivers and Bayelsa states in offices. Data for this study were analysed using quantitative and qualitative methods. Data obtained with the questionnaire were analysed quantitatively in statistical tables using the weighted mean score based on a four-point Likert scale. Mean, standard deviation and rank order were used to analyse the data collected from the research questions of the study.

Result and Discussion

Research Question One: In what ways are the digital communication techniques deployed in employee relations activities in universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown?

Table 2: Ways Digital Communication Techniques deployed in Employee Relations Activities during Covid-19 Lockdown in Rivers and Bayelsa States

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	StD	Rank	Remark
1.	In my institution digital communication techniques were more interactive, participatory, egalitarian, decentralized and less hierarchical	170 (680)	204 (612)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.45	0.5	3rd	Agreed
2.	My institution provided a unified communication platform such as email, WhatsApp, etc	170 (680)	194 (582)	10 (20)	0 (0)	3.42	0.89	5th	Agreed
3.	My institution had a productive online meetings via zoom and video conferencing	190 (760)	180 (540)	0 (0)	4 (4)	3.48	0.94	2nd	Agreed
4.	In my institution, there were give and receive feedbacks	170 (680)	190 (570)	13 (26)	2 (2)	3.41	0.99	6th	Agreed
5.	In my institution, there were diversity of available digital channels	210 (840)	160 (480)	4 (8)	0 (0)	3.55	0.67	1st	Agreed
6.	In my institution, urgent notifications were reserved for only the most time-sensitive information	170 (680)	200 (600)	0 (0)	4 (4)	3.43	0.88	4th	Agreed
	Grand Mean					**3.45**			Agreed

Table 2 above indicates that the ways digital communication techniques were deployed in employee relations activities during Covid-19 lockdown in institutions in Rivers and Bayelsa States were more interactive, participatory, egalitarian, decentralized, less hierarchical, give and receive feedbacks, a productive online meetings through zoom and video conferencing, a unified communication platform such as email, WhatsApp, and diversity of available digital channels, reserved for only the most time-sensitive information.

Research Question 2: What are the benefits derived from digital communication techniques in employee relations activities in universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown?

Table 3: Benefits derived from Digital Communication Techniques in Employee Relations Activities in Universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 Lockdown

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	StD	Rank	Remark
7.	Digital communication techniques helped my institution to deliver timely information	180 (720)	190 (570)	0 (0)	4 (4)	3.45	0.89	6th	Agreed
8.	Digital communication techniques made my institution to enhance employee relations activities and empowerment	230 (920)	134 (402)	10 (20)	0 (0)	3.58	0.66	1st	Agreed
9.	My institution increased organisational transparency via digital communication techniques	210 (840)	150 (450)	10 (20)	4 (4)	3.51	0.76	4th	Agreed
10.	My institution eliminated organisational silos and employee worked faster and better through digital communication techniques	220 (880)	144 (432)	10 (20)	0 (0)	3.56	0.62	2nd	Agreed
11.	My institution stayed connected, created and reinforced a shared purpose and value via digital communication techniques	170 (680)	190 (570)	12 (24)	2 (2)	3.41	0.93	7th	Agreed
12.	Digital communication techniques helped my	145	220	9	0				

		SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	StD	Rank	Remark
	institution with a collaborative culture to drive successful and increased productivity	(580)	(660)	(18)	(0)	3.36	0.81	9th	Agreed
13.	Digital communication techniques aided my institution to allow decisions to be made, discussed and implemented at speed	200 (800)	170 (510)	4 (8)	0 (0)	3.52	0.69	3rd	Agreed
14.	Digital communication techniques helped my institution to lessened the odds of miscommunication, misunderstanding and grievances	190 (760)	174 (522)	10 (20)	0 (0)	3.48	0.79	5th	Agreed
15.	Digital communication helped my institution to build employee morale and loyalty	144 (576)	230 (690)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.38	0.75	8th	Agreed
	Grand Mean					**3.47**			**Accepted**

Table 3 above shows that the delivery of timely information, enhancement of employee relations activities and empowerment, increased organisational transparency, elimination of organisational silos, fast and better employee work, stayed connected, created and reinforced a shared purpose and value, collaborative culture to drive successful and increased productivity, allowed decisions to be made, discussed and implemented at speed, lessened the odds of miscommunication, misunderstanding and grievances, built employee morale and loyalty were benefits derived from digital communication techniques in employee relations activities in the institutions during Covid-19 lockdown.

Research Question 3: What are the challenges in the use of digital communication techniques for employee relations in the universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown?

Table 4: Challenges in the use of Digital Communication Techniques for Employee Relations in the Universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	StD	Rank	Remark
16.	Hackers can make their way into virtual meetings	200 (800)	170 (510)	0 (0)	4 (4)	3.51	0.8	2nd	Agreed
17.	Email phishing opens a door for the entire organisation's online	156 (624)	210 (630)	8 (16)	0 (0)	3.39	0.82	5th	Agreed

	systems to be compromised								
18.	Frenetic speed of engagement and unending pressure from enquiring employees	180 (720)	190 (570)	2 (4)	2 (2)	3.46	0.89	4th	Agreed
19.	Denigration of space quality if information	160 (640)	180 (540)	4 (8)	0 (0)	3.17	0.93	6th	Agreed
20.	Prone to abuse by scrupulous element deliberately	210 (840)	64 (192)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2.75	0.69	7th	Agreed
21.	Plurality, anonymity and rarity to crosscheck source of information	190 (760)	180 (540)	4 (8)	0 (0)	3.49	0.66	3rd	Agreed
22.	Fear of hackers infiltrating the institution account	230 (920)	144 (432)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.61	0.6	1st	Agreed
	Grand Mean					**3.34**			Agreed

Table 4 above reveals that the hackers, email phishing, frenetic speed of engagement, unending pressure, denigration of space quality of information, abuse by scrupulous elements, plurality, anonymity of information and fear of hackers infiltrating the institution account were the challenges in the use of digital communication techniques for employee relations in the universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown.

Discussion of findings

The data analysed in tables 2 to 4 provided the platform for this discussion which was purely done in relation to the research objectives and questions. Each of the tables handled and addressed a given research question.

Research Question One:

In what ways are the digital communication techniques deployed in employee relations activities in universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown?

The finding from the questionnaire revealed that the ways digital communication techniques were deployed in employee relations activities during Covid-19 lockdown in institutions in Rivers and Bayelsa States were more interactive, participatory, egalitarian, decentralized, less hierarchical, give and receive feedbacks, a productive online meetings via zoom and video conferencing, a unified communication platform such as email, WhatsApp etc, diversity of available digital channels, reserved for only the most time-sensitive information, etc. The adaptive structural theory gives backing to these findings of the study as it proposes that the effective appropriation of technology needs a minimum mastery of the digital tools, the integration of the use of the digital tools in employee relations practices and the possibility of the emergence of an innovation use of the digital tools. Also, Lipiainen et al. (2014) pointed out that as

organisations adapt its internal communication to digital communication tools, tremendous opportunities with employees emerges constantly. The digital internal communication facilitates two-way-message, it allows feedback to be given and received.

Research Question Two: What are the benefits derived from digital communication techniques in employee relations activities in universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown?

The finding from the questionnaire revealed that delivery of timely information, enhancement of employee relations activities and empowerment, increased organisational transparency, elimination of organisational silos, fast and better employee work, stayed connected, created and reinforced a shared purpose and value, collaborative culture to drive successful and increased productivity, allowed decisions to be made, discussed and implemented at speed, lessened the odds of miscommunication, misunderstanding and grievances, built employee morale and loyalty were benefits derived from digital communication techniques in employee relations activities in the institutions during Covid-19 lockdown. This upholds the finding of Itighise and Akpaetor (2014) that digital communication media have significant influence, ensure more effective and transactional organisational communication at diverse degrees of intensity and reach depending on authority structure and line staff within the institutions examined. Also, the adaptive structural theory upon which the study is anchored gives the backing to the findings of this study. The theory posits that organisation benefits from technology by putting themselves in the position to attract and retain experienced staff and drive greater employees' loyalty.

Research Question Three: what are the challenges in the use of digital communication techniques for employee relations in the universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown?

From the result of the questionnaire revealed that hackers, email phishing, frenetic speed of engagement, unending pressure, denigration of space quality of information, abuse by scrupulous elements, plurality, anonymity of information and fear of hackers infiltrating the institution account were the challenges in the use of digital communication techniques for employee relations in the universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown. This finding aligns with Hult and Brystron (2021) as posited that the complexity of the development of workplaces, characterised by strong but diffuse relationships between people, technology and work practices. Also, the finding Is in tandem with the study of Madueke, et al., (2017), who outline the challenges of implementing e-administration in Nigeria and some drawbacks to it, such as ICT illiteracy rate, epileptic power supply, cybercrime, etc. the adaptive structural theory also supports the findings of this study as proposes that technology designed for individuals may not be user-friendly when applied to team setting. Likewise, technology designed for organisation may not be suited for teams. This interaction between the technology structures is designed and the team's requirements to complete their goals may not be correctly aligned. This is why the system theory focuses on the issue of synergy, interdependently and interconnections within an organisation and between the organisation and the danger environment.

Conclusion

The study concluded that there is a significant ways digital communication deployed influenced employee relations activities in universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown; that there is significant benefits derived from digital communication techniques on employee relations activities in universities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown; and that there is significant challenges in the use of digital communication techniques on employee relations activities in Rivers and Bayelsa States during Covid-19 lockdown.

Also, based on the findings, the study concluded that digital communication techniques such as digital remarks, asynchronous communication, communication consistent, clarity and brevity, making every message count, and continuous communication quality building skills can help university institutions prevent misunderstanding in employee relations, balance the demands of works and enhance employee relation activities success during tough times or in any tight situations. Technology is integral to employees' connection and communication especially in moment of quarantines and lockdown as a result of health crises and other emergencies. Therefore, the way digital communication techniques are deploying in university institutions becomes paramount. Based on this, the study concluded that digital communication techniques should be more interactive, participatory, egalitarian, decentralised and less hierarchical.

The study also established that technology is an essential tool to offer in employees relations because of its benefits such as delivery of timely information, enhancement of employee relations activities and empowerment, increase of organisational transparency etc. finally, the study established that hackers, email phishing, frenetic speed of engagement and unending pressure from enquiring employees can open a door for the entire organisation's online systems to be compromised.

Recommendations

Based on the result of the study discussed above, the researcher therefore, came up with the following recommendations:

1. The federal and state universities authority should articulate a policy to integrate a participatory, egalitarian, decentralised communication platform into the mainstream of university institution workplace and administration. This is to ensure a unified communication platform such as email, WhatsApp etc
2. University institutions should eliminate organisational silos and increase organisational transparency for better and fast employee work and should also build employee morale and loyalty.
3. Employee should always be aware of hackers and denigration of space quality of information which open door for the entire organisation's online system to be compromised.

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