



Are important corporate policies understood by employees?

Important
corporate
policies

A tracking study of organizational information flow

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to present the results of a study into the effectiveness of the communication of anti-sectarian legislation in four of the largest public and private sector organizations in Northern Ireland (NI). The study had two related central objectives. Firstly, to ascertain the level of employee understanding of anti-sectarian rules and regulations in NI workplaces, and, secondly, to evaluate the relevance of an Episodic Communication Channels in Organization (ECCO) approach to the investigation of this key aspect of organizational practice.

Design/methodology/approach – An ECCO questionnaire was used to evaluate and track employee understanding of existing legislation, and chart the sources, channels, location and timing of information dissemination.

Findings – A clear finding was that there was a paucity of employee understanding of existing policies and procedures with regard to sectarianism.

Practical implications – The results are discussed in relation to the importance of effective information flow on key organizational issues.

Originality/value – The efficacy of ECCO as a communication audit tool for charting information dissemination is evaluated.

Keywords Organizations, Communication, Conflict management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As a society, Northern Ireland (NI) is deeply divided across politico-religious lines. There are two separate and distinct communities each with diametrically opposed political aspirations. In essence, the catholic/nationalist community supports the goal of amalgamation between NI and the Republic of Ireland (RoI) in a new united Ireland, and thereby to achieve separation from the rest of the UK. On the other hand, the protestant/unionist community wishes to maintain the UK of Great Britain and NI and ensure continued separation from the RoI. The implacable divisions between these two “sides” in NI has resulted in deep levels of internecine strife (the “Troubles”), culminating in serious loss of life, with over 3,700 people killed in the past 35 years (Smyth and Hamilton, 2004), the pro rata equivalent of 600,000 fatalities in the USA or 115,000 in the UK.

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The divisions are deep and manifold, encompassing much of the social, cultural, sporting and educational life of NI. The psychological barriers are reflected by physical ones in the form of “peace walls” in Belfast that literally separate the two communities, and protect each from the other. Thus, Protestants (P) and Catholics (C) are separated at birth through area of residence; for example, over 70 percent of all public housing throughout NI is segregated, and in the city of Belfast this figure is some 98 percent (Jarman, 2004). Not surprisingly, many children learn the language and actions of division from about the age of two years (Connolly and Neill, 2004). Children are also educated separately at maintained (C) and state controlled (mainly P) schools, with only four percent of children attending “integrated” schools, which take children from both religious denominations (Gallagher, 2004). A great deal of sport in NI is also segregated into exclusively Catholic (hurling, camogie, gaelic football) and mainly Protestant (rugby, hockey) games (although some popular sports such as soccer, golf, and tennis are played by both sections of the community). In adult life, friendships tend to be in-group, as are some 90 percent of marriages (Niens *et al.*, 2004).

A perhaps inevitable outcome from these inter-communal divisions is that, despite the attempt at a political solution in the form of the Good Friday Agreement (Belfast Agreement), and a marked reduction in terrorist atrocities, it would seem that relationships between the two communities continue to deteriorate (Bloomer and Weinreich, 2004). The rift is also reflected in the development of the emergent separate identities of “Irish” (mainly Catholic) and “Ulster-Scots” (primarily Protestant), each with its own language and associated cultural representations (Stapleton and Wilson, 2004; Wilson and Stapleton, 2003). The stark reality is that most people in NI now experience a form of “voluntary apartheid.” Hargie and Dickson (2004) have shown how they live, go to school, socialize, and play sport in, segregated environments. So, given this world of almost “parallel development,” what happens when the two communities are faced with situations where they have no choice but to interact? One such context is within organizations.

The NI workplace has not been immune to the effects of the internecine conflict, and has suffered the consequences in terms of operational disruption and financial loss. However, while there is a considerable body of research into the causes and outcomes of the “Troubles,” few studies have addressed the organizational context. In discussing this issue, Hargie *et al.* (2005) identified two main reasons for this research hiatus. Firstly, there exists a view among many employers that any focus on division only serves to reinforce and validate the schism, and that it is best to ignore difference (in the forlorn hope that it will go away) rather than accentuate it. Secondly, many managers hold the view that a focus on sectarian division in the organization may actually create unwanted conflicts and so it is better to “keep the lid on” existing problems rather than open them up to scrutiny.

At the same time, stringent anti-discrimination legislation has been enacted in NI (e.g. the Protection from Harassment (NI) Order 1997, and the Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998). This means that there is a legal imperative on large employers to recruit a balanced workforce and to ensure that no employee suffers from sectarian abuse. As a result, in all major public and private sector corporations, individuals from the two communities work side by side. Given the divided geopolitical topography of NI, however, organizations are often located in the territory of one side or the other, and this makes recruitment from the minority group in that area problematic.

Nevertheless, there is now a legal requirement upon employers both to take steps to prevent sectarianism in the workplace, and to have firm procedures in place to deal with cases of sectarianism if and when they occur. However, it is one thing to have procedures in place but quite another to ensure they are functionally effective. Once again, there has been a dearth of research into the efficacy of workplace anti-discrimination procedures in NI. It is almost as if the fact that such procedures have been implemented, and disseminated to employees, should suffice in itself. Thus, what is unclear is the extent to which employees actually understand existing legislation, or really know what procedure to follow if they experience sectarian harassment. The present study was designed to help to close this research gap. In order to do so, a communication audit methodology was deemed as being most appropriate.

The communication audit approach to measuring and monitoring organizational performance was hugely popular, and generated a considerable volume of academic publications, in the 1970s (Hargie and Tourish, 2004). However, until the early part of the new millennium, academic interest in this approach had waned. There were two main reasons for the trend away from the audit as a focus of academic attention. Firstly, iterative or interpretive approaches were in the vanguard of organizational investigation (Scott *et al.*, 1999), inspired by the predominance of a reflexive philosophical perspective on communicative enquiry (Anderson and Baym, 2004). The audit tended to be viewed as scientific, positivist, diagnostic and prescriptive, and conceptualized as being counter to the emergent intuitive approaches. Secondly, and in line with the latter point, organizational analysts became more interested in theoretical frameworks than applied concerns (Mumby and Stohl, 1996). Against this backdrop, the audit was perceived as very much a pragmatic management tool that would produce few new epistemological or conceptual insights into organizational life (Hargie and Tourish, 2004).

Yet, despite the lack of systematic academic analysis in the 1980s and 1990s, the audit approach continued to flourish in practice, with organizations auditing on a regular basis. Audit methods were also consistently taught as standard practice on most organizational communication courses (Scott *et al.*, 1999; Shelby and Reinsch, 1996; Zorn, 2002). In this sense, at grass roots level the audit momentum was maintained. More recently, an academic renaissance also seems to be in train, with the past few years witnessing a resurgence of interest in this field. Part of the reason for this is that it is now widely recognized that the audit is not just a top-down management tool, and that the equally valid perspectives of employees need to be given cognizance in any assessment of organizational communication. This has led to a growth of interest in collaborative audit approaches (Jones, 2002).

Thus, the audit is again the focus of academic attention. A new audit text (Hargie and Tourish, 2000) was published at the turn of the century, and an updated edition of an established audit book (Downs and Adrian, 2004) was published four years later. In addition, audit research papers (Bilbao *et al.*, 2002; Hargie *et al.*, 2002, 2003; Quinn and Hargie, 2004; Hogard *et al.*, 2005), book chapters (Kazoleas and Wright, 2001; Tourish and Hargie, 2004), and critiques (Gayeski, 2000; Dickson *et al.* 2003) of audit methodologies, have also recently been published.

However, although the main audit methods (survey, interview, focus group) have been extensively employed and widely researched, one method in particular has been little utilized. This is the Episodic Communication Channels in Organization (ECCO) approach, initially developed by Davis (1953), who found that the ECCO framework

was adaptable to different types of organization and acceptable to management and employees alike. He also illustrated that it could produce specific and valuable information about communication flow. The ECCO is designed to evaluate the flow of communication in an organization, test staff understanding of key internal information, assess the efficiency of channels of dissemination and identify the most effective media for delivering information. The purpose of the ECCO format is: "to analyze and map communication networks and measure rates of flow, distortion of messages, and redundancy" (Goldhaber, 1993). In this way, the ECCO is used to ascertain the penetration of specific information through the organization. Although originally developed by Davis as a means for tracking the flow of one informal communication message over a limited 24 hour time frame, the adaptability of the ECCO method means that it can be applied more widely to evaluate different aspects of existing communication systems and diagnose deficits therein. It is now regarded as a flexible approach that can be tailored to investigate specific aspects of employee knowledge (Hargie and Tourish, 2000). However, for an ECCO to be effective, the information to be tracked should be:

- factual;
- expected to be widely known by most if not all staff; and
- basic and straightforward (Hargie and Tourish, 2000).

Given these parameters, this method was felt to be ideally suited for the present study, since it would enable detailed information to be garnered on employee knowledge of anti-sectarian policies and procedures in the work-place, and facilitate an analysis of the related patterns and processes whereby such information is disseminated. Strengths and weaknesses in the flow of communication could also be charted.

In an ECCO respondents are required (Downs and Adrian, 2004) to list:

- whether or not they know all or part of the information;
- if they know about it, to cite the parts they know;
- when they first learned of it;
- where they were when they first became aware of it;
- by which channel the message was delivered; and
- the source of the information.

The completed ECCO provides a picture of whether or not communication is flowing well, how long it takes information to reach certain destinations, which channel and source seem to be most effective in disseminating messages, and where there appear to be problems. Furthermore, the ECCO questionnaire is brief and can be easily completed in a short period of time. This means that it can be administered to a large sample of staff. Among its disadvantages are that some staff may be reluctant to identify sources, while others are loath to admit that they are in ignorance of what is then perceived to be an important piece of information. Given these potential advantages, it is surprising that over the past three decades, and despite strong recommendations from academics about its efficacy (Irving and Tourish, 1994), there has been a paucity of reported research into organizational communication using ECCO methodology. The present study will help to remedy this research deficit.

The overall aim of the study was therefore to employ an ECCO audit methodology to systematically investigate dissemination patterns, and extent of employee knowledge of anti-sectarian procedures, in the workplace. More specifically, four main research objectives (RO) were formulated:

- RO1.* To compare the relative effectiveness of organizations in ensuring employee knowledge regarding formal and informal procedures for dealing with sectarian grievances.
- RO2.* To assess the extent of employee knowledge of rules relating to banned insignia across organizations.
- RO3.* To chart the temporal, geographical and personal dissemination of information regarding formal and informal grievance procedures.
- RO4.* To evaluate the relevance of an ECCO approach to the operational investigation of anti-sectarian rules and regulations in workplaces in NI.

Methodology

Sample

The sample for this study was employees in the top-ranking public and private organizations in NI. The following criteria were applied in the selection process:

- All of NI's top 100 private companies with over 100 staff were contacted regarding possible inclusion in the study. This was because small firms in NI are exempt from fair employment legislation.
- To ensure a spread of representation, not less than 10 percent of the workforce should be comprised of the minority group in that particular workplace.
- All government organizations ($n = 51$) were invited to participate.
- Organizations were to represent a geographical spread across NI.
- For the purposes of research feasibility, four organizations (two private and two public sector) were to be recruited.

Given the above backdrop, a letter detailing the study was sent to all major government organizations and the top private sector companies. Following a period of collaboration and negotiation with those organizations that expressed interest, the target sample was selected. The research contract guaranteed organizations' anonymity, and so it is not possible to provide full details of the nature and structure of each. They will be identified as A, B, C and D, as follows:

- Organization A – a local government body.
- Organization B – a private sector employer involved in production.
- Organization C – a public sector employer in healthcare.
- Organization D – a private sector employer in the field of caring.

The religious balances of the workforces were: Organization A (81 percent P; 19 percent C); Organization B (85 percent P; 15 percent C); Organization C (36 percent P; 64 percent C); Organization D (63 percent P; 37 percent C).

In relation to the administration of the ECCO questionnaire, a stratified random sampling approach was adopted based upon organizational databases as sampling frames, representing religious affiliation, occupational job type, and gender. Given the marked religious imbalance of the workforce in some of the organizations a disproportionate sampling method was used for the ECCO administration with 60 percent of the majority and 40 percent of the minority included. The sample size for each organization, together with the percentage figure for total workforce, was: A ($n = 150$; 34 percent), B ($n = 400$; 6 percent), C ($n = 160$; 8 percent) and D ($n = 122$; 8 percent). Thus, in total, 832 employees were surveyed.

The ECCO instrument

Following a detailed analysis of anti-sectarian regulations, policies and procedures across all four organizations, the ECCO questionnaire was designed. The ECCO was divided into three main areas, focusing upon:

- (1) employee knowledge of their organization's informal procedures for raising grievances of a sectarian nature;
- (2) employee knowledge of their organization's formal procedures for raising grievances of a sectarian nature; and
- (3) employee interpretation of in-house policies relating to the organization's flags and emblems policy.

These three key pieces of information were selected due to their pivotal level of importance in terms of anti-sectarian policies and procedures, the expected high comprehension of such information on the part of employees, and because the information was available across all organizations for comparative analysis.

In the first part of the ECCO, respondents were presented with a number of statements highlighting what an employee should do when suffering sectarian harassment at work, at an informal stage according to in-house policies. Some/all of the four statements presented were applicable choices to which participants were invited to respond. In relation to the information they had regarding sectarian harassment at the informal stage, respondents were then asked to provide details of the source, channel, timing, and location of receipt of information. In the second part of the ECCO, communication of grievance procedures at a formal stage was tested, in relation to source, channel, timing and location of information. In the third part of the ECCO employees were presented with a number of items (badges, flags, sports tops, etc.), and asked to state whether the item was banned from their workplace. The ECCO was pilot tested on employees who were not part of the main sample.

Procedures

The ECCO questionnaires were completed at work locations, with participants being given time off to do this. In order to avoid having to request that respondents state their religious affiliation on the questionnaire (essential information for later analysis), negotiation with the Human Resource Departments of the corporations led to a system whereby participants were identified by staff number only. By omitting staff names from datasets, legal and ethical issues surrounding data protection were safeguarded. In line with data protection requirements, letters inviting employees to participate in the study were addressed to individual staff numbers. These were then forwarded to

the Human Resources Department in each organization who placed the sealed envelopes in a second envelope with a supporting letter from the organization. The human resources section was then responsible for distributing letters to individuals. The researchers were able to determine the religion of respondents from their numbers, but could not identify them by name. A numbered label was attached to each questionnaire.

Results

The survey return rates for each organization were: A (63.3 percent; $n = 94$), B (50.8 percent; $n = 203$), C (41 percent; $n = 65$), D (64.2 percent; $n = 77$). Thus, across all organizations, 439 completed ECCO questionnaires were returned, representing an overall completion rate of 55 percent. The questionnaire investigated three main themes:

- (1) knowledge of the organization's informal grievance procedures;
- (2) knowledge of the organization's formal grievance procedures; and
- (3) interpretation of the organization's Flags and Emblems Policy.

In relation to the first of these, in the ECCO employees were presented with a number of statements highlighting options they might take when suffering sectarian harassment at work, at an informal stage, and were required to say whether or not these formed part of the in-house policy. Four options, which are part of the policies of most organizations in NI, were offered to respondents (Table I). These statements were all part of the official policy of Org A. However, in Org B the option of "approaching the person who has aggrieved him/her and if preferred do so with a colleague or Trade Union representative" was not part of the official policy. Likewise, in Org C and Org D the option of "not approaching the person but instead going straight to the supervisor" was also not part of company policy. In these instances, therefore, the correct choice for respondents from these organizations was to identify that these statements were not part of company policy. These instances apart, an affirmative response represented the correct choice.

As shown in Table I, there was a paucity of knowledge regarding the procedures for pursuing informal grievance procedures. In all but two instances, less than 50 percent of the workforce was able to correctly identify the set procedure. In the best case scenarios, 65 percent of respondents in Org C and just over 52 percent in Org A correctly identified that it was part of policy that the employee could approach the aggressor and if preferred do so with the support of a supervisor/manager/designated officer. In the worst case scenarios, just under 18 percent of respondents in Org D recognized that it was not part of the in-house policy that the complainant could go straight to a supervisor/manager rather than approach the aggressor, while 26.5 percent of employees in Org B failed to identify that they could not approach the person who had aggrieved them and if preferred do so with a colleague or Trade Union representative.

In terms of organizational comparisons, Table I shows that Org C was marginally more successful, with an overall 49 percent average correct answers about informal grievance procedures, than Org A (average 47 percent), followed by Org B (35 percent), with Org D scoring lowest (33 percent). A $2 \times 2 \chi^2$ -test of contingencies was carried out to establish if those working in public or private organizations were more knowledgeable of informal grievance procedures. We set the α -value at 5 percent.

Table I.
Percentage of employees correctly identifying the set procedures in their organization in relation to the informal grievance policy

	Org A		Org B		Org C		Org D		Sum (percent)	All orgs (percent)
	C	P	C	P	C	P	C	P		
When raising a grievance about sectarianism the person should	13.1	31.1	16	29	40	25	18.2	27.3	45.5	47.4
Approach the person who has aggrieved him/her and if preferred do so with the support of a supervisor/manager (or designated officer where applicable)	14.6	33.7	12	14.5	33.3	14.3	13	23.2	36.2	41.6
Approach the person who has aggrieved him/her and advise that the behavior is offensive	14.4	37.8	15.1	14.1	25	15.3	10.9	21.9	32.8	38.6
Approach the person who has aggrieved him/her and if preferred do so with a colleague or Trade Union representative	19.3	25.3	18.4	19.9	25.8	16.1	7.2	10.5	17.7 ^a	35.2
Not approach the person who has aggrieved him/her, instead go straight to a Supervisor/Manager	15.4	32	15.4	19.4	35	17.7	49	20.7	33	37.1
Average percent										

Note: All four options for raising a grievance about sectarianism were part of each organization's policy, with the exception of those marked with ^a where the figure represents the percentage of respondents who correctly identified that this was not an available option in that particular organization's policy

There was a clear difference ($\chi^2 = 4.84$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$) between the two public (Org A and Org C) and the two private (Org B and Org D) sector organizations, with the former achieving a higher percentage of correct scores. A further 2X2 contingencies test was conducted to evaluate whether Protestant or Catholic employees were better informed of informal grievance procedures. No significant association emerged ($\chi^2 = 2.65$, $df = 1$, $p = ns$). In Org A, Protestant (P) employees were twice as likely as Catholic (C) employees to correctly identify set procedures, whereas in Org C this pattern was reversed with Catholic employees being almost twice as likely as Protestants to identify the correct answers. However, one interesting finding was that in all organizations, the majority group (whether P or C) had a better understanding of the policies and procedures than the minority group ($\chi^2 = 7.04$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.01$), based upon a third 2X2 contingencies analysis. Finally, across all organizations, employees demonstrated differences in procedural recognition, in that, for example, while over 47 percent correctly identified that the employee could approach the aggressor and if preferred do so with the support of a supervisor/manager/designated officer, only 35 percent gave the correct response in relation to whether or not it was acceptable to not approach the person who had aggrieved them but instead go straight to a supervisor/manager.

The ECCO also investigated primary organizational sources and channels in relation to the dissemination of information to the workforce about informal grievance procedures. Employees were requested to list the main sources and channels through which they received this information. As shown in Table II, the two main overall sources from which employees indicated that information was received, together accounting for over two-thirds of information received, were firstly supervisors/managers, and secondly colleagues. This was followed by policy documents, trainers and HR Departments. At the other extreme, just under 5 percent of respondents in Orgs B and C stated that they had never even heard of an informal grievance procedure. A comparison of public (A and C) and private (B and D) sector organizations reveals that in the former “trainers” were one of the main sources of information whereas in the latter they were not listed as a source at all; in addition “policy documents” achieved a higher percentage score as a source of information in the public sector. In terms of channel through which the information was delivered, the largest percentage of respondents (44.7 percent) indicated that they received this information during training sessions (Table III). Only in Org B was training not the main stated channel, with the primary one being “informal conversation.” This latter channel was second overall, followed by written communication and policy documents.

	Org A (percent)	Org B (percent)	Org C (percent)	Org D (percent)	Source average (percent)
Supervisors/managers	37.9	32.3	18.6	51.9	35.2
Colleagues	22.6	43.7	27.9	36.8	32.8
Policy documents	17.7	3.5	16.3	9.4	11.7
Trainers	17.6	–	11.6	–	7.3
Human Resource Department	1.5	2.8	20.9	1.9	6.8
Trade Union	2.7	13.3	–	–	4
“Never heard of it”	–	4.4	4.7	–	2.3

Table II.
Main source from which
employees received
information regarding the
informal grievance policy

The main location in which information about informal grievance procedures was first received was an informal work situation (Table IV). This accounted for almost two-thirds of the total percentage responses (65.3 percent) and was the premier location across all organizations. The next most common location was a formal work context. Just under 10 percent of all respondents stated that they were outside the organization when they received the information. Finally, in relation to timing (Table V), the largest percentage of respondents (31.3 percent) indicated that they had first received this information between one and three years previously, followed by those who indicated that it was over three years since they received it (28.2 percent), with the time frame of 2-6 months previously being the third largest choice (21.8 percent).

The second major theme investigated in the ECCO related to the dissemination of information about formal grievance procedures. Here, employees were presented with a number of options pertaining to the formal stage of making a complaint about sectarian harassment at work. The first of these related to policy regarding the length of time within which the corporation would respond to such a complaint. The set timescale varied across organizations. The correct timescales for each organization are listed in Table VI, together with details of the percentage of employees who correctly identified this information. As can be seen from Table VI, there was a very poor level of

Table III.

Main channel of information through which employees received information regarding the informal grievance policy

	Org A (percent)	Org B (percent)	Org C (percent)	Org D (percent)	Channel average (percent)
Training	61	30.6	35	52	44.7
Informal conversation	9	40.7	25	22	24.2
Written communication	20	27.4	29	16	23.1
Policy documents	3	–	11	10	6
Other	7	–	–	–	2
Intranet	–	1.3	–	–	0.3

Table IV.

Location at which information regarding the informal grievance policy was first received by employees

	Org A (percent)	Org B (percent)	Org C (percent)	Org D (percent)	Location average (percent)
Informal work location	60.3	58.5	73.3	69.2	65.3
Formal work situation	25.1	16.3	6.8	21.2	17.4
Outside the organization	9.3	13.6	6.6	7.7	9.3
Through training/induction	5.3	11.6	13.3	1.9	8

Table V.

Length of time since information regarding the informal grievance policy was first received by employees

	Org A (percent)	Org B (percent)	Org C (percent)	Org D (percent)	Timing average (percent)
1-3 years ago	12.3	36.6	42.5	33.7	31.3
Over 3 years ago	12.3	35.6	35	29.8	28.2
2-6 months ago	48	9.7	15	14.6	21.8
7-11 months ago	15.1	13.1	7.5	4.8	10.1
Less than 6 weeks ago	12.3	5	–	17.1	8.7

understanding of the set in-house time limit within which the organization should respond to acknowledge a complaint about a sectarian incident. Correct response rates ranged from the low score of 14.2 percent in Org C to the highest of 20.4 percent in Org D. In other words, across all organizations, some 80 percent of employees failed to identify this key aspect of company policy. No main differences emerged between public and private sector companies ($\chi^2 = 0.89$, $df = 1$, $p = ns$). Likewise, there was no clear pattern of religious difference ($\chi^2 = 1.7$, $df = 1$, $p = ns$). In Orgs A and D Protestants achieved higher percentage correct scores than Catholics, but in Org C this trend was reversed. However, as with knowledge of the correct responses regarding informal grievances (Table I) once again, in all organizations, the majority group (whether P or C) had a better understanding of the policies and procedures that apply at the stage of formal grievances than the minority group ($\chi^2 = 6.94$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.01$).

The ECCO also investigated primary organizational sources and channels in relation to the dissemination of information to the workforce about formal grievance procedures. Again, employees were requested to list the main sources and channels through which they received this information. The trends here mirror very closely the results in relation to informal grievance procedures. The two main sources of information, together accounting for over two-thirds of information received, were firstly supervisors/managers and colleagues (Table VII). This was followed by policy documents, trainers and the Trade Union. As with informal grievances, under 5 percent of respondents in Orgs B and C stated that they had never heard of a formal grievance procedure. A comparison of public (A and C) and private (B and D) sector organizations reveals again that in the former “trainers” were an important source of information, while they were not listed as a source at all by private sector company B, and received

Timescale for organizational response to formal complaint	Org A		Org B			Org C			Org D		(percent)	
	C	P	Sum	C	P	Sum	C	P	Sum	C		P
			(percent)			(percent)			(percent)			
2 working days	–	–	–	8.5	9.6	18.1	–	–	–	–	–	–
3 working days	5.6	12.9	18.5	–	–	–	–	–	–	3.7	16.7	20.4
No set limit	–	–	–	–	–	–	9.4	4.8	14.2	–	–	–

Table VI. Percentage of employees correctly identifying the set policy time limit in their organization for response to a formal grievance complaint

	Org A (percent)	Org B (percent)	Org C (percent)	Org D (percent)	Source average (percent)
Supervisors/managers	38.4	33.3	30	59.5	40.3
Colleagues	23.4	35	30	18.9	26.8
Policy documents	19.1	4.5	17	13.5	13.5
Trainers	14.9	–	14.3	5.4	8.7
Trade Union	2.1	19.7	2.9	–	6.2
Human Resource Department	2.1	3	2.9	2.7	2.7
“Never heard of it”	–	4.5	2.9	–	1.9

Table VII. Main source from which employees received information regarding the formal grievance policy

a low percentage score from Org D. In terms of channel through which the information was delivered, as shown in Table VIII, the largest percentage of respondents (41.8 percent) indicated that they received information on formal grievance procedures during training sessions. This parallels the findings in relation to informal channels. Only in Org B was training not the main stated channel, with the primary one being “written communication.” This latter channel was second overall, followed by informal conversations and policy documents. Listed within the “other” category were e-mail and the intranet, although this was only mentioned as a channel in Org B.

As with informal grievance procedures, the main location in which information about formal grievance procedures was first received, across all organizations, was an informal work context (Table IX). The next most common location was a formal work situation. Some 13 percent of all respondents stated that they were outside the organization when they received the information, while just over 10 percent indicated that they learned of the information during training/induction. Finally, in relation to timing, as shown in Table X, the largest percentage of respondents (35.4 percent) indicated that they had first received this information over three years previously, followed by those who indicated that it was between one and three years since they

Table VIII.

Main channel of information through which employees received information regarding the formal grievance policy

	Org A (percent)	Org B (percent)	Org C (percent)	Org D (percent)	Channel average (percent)
Training	44.6	16.4	33	73	41.8
Written communication	17.8	31.1	29	8	21.5
Informal conversation	15.6	14.8	19	11	15.1
Policy documents	11	26.2	14	8	14.8
Other	11	11.5	5	–	6.9

Table IX.

Location at which information regarding the formal grievance policy was first received by employees

	Org A (percent)	Org B (percent)	Org C (percent)	Org D (percent)	Location average (percent)
Informal work location	55.5	48.5	60.9	67.6	58.1
Formal work situation	22.2	12.1	4.4	21.6	15.1
Outside the organization	13.3	21.2	8.7	10.1	13.3
Through training/induction	9	18.2	13	0.7	10.2
Through personal experience	–	–	13	–	3.3

Table X.

Length of time since information regarding the informal grievance policy was first received by employees

	Org A (percent)	Org B (percent)	Org C (percent)	Org D (percent)	Timing Average (percent)
Over 3 years ago	16.3	41.6	45.5	38.1	35.4
1-3 years ago	18.7	37.2	45.5	32.6	33.5
2-6 months ago	41.8	7.1	9	11.5	17.4
Less than 6 weeks ago	11.6	6.2	–	14.2	8
7-11 months ago	11.6	7.9	–	3.6	5.8

received it (33.5 percent), with the time frame of 2-6 months previously being the third largest choice (17.4 percent).

The third major theme investigated in the ECCO related to the dissemination of information about regulations governing the display of flags and emblems in the workplace. Eight main insignia were identified from the four organizations (Table XI). These included Glasgow Celtic FC (supported by Catholics in NI) and Glasgow Rangers FC (supported by Protestants in NI) soccer jerseys, and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) sports tops (in NI the GAA is very closely identified with the catholic/nationalist tradition). It also included the poppy (worn on the days preceding Armistice Day in remembrance of members of the armed forces who died in war). During the conflict in NI this symbol has been more closely associated with the Protestant/Unionist tradition. Likewise, emblems associated with community conflict were highlighted. For example, Spirit of Drumcree Badges are associated with the Protestant/Unionist tradition, while Saoirse Ribbons are associated with the catholic/nationalist tradition.

The results in this part of the ECCO again reflected the general trend of lack of detailed knowledge across organizations, with an overall correct response average of 58.3 percent. For example, under 39 percent of all respondents correctly recognized that Christian badges were not banned in organizations, and less than 50 percent realized that shamrocks were also not banned. At the other extreme, over 71 percent of respondents did identify that flags associated with community conflict were banned, although this also means that almost 30 percent did not recognize this fact. The scores ranged from the highest of 95.1 percent of Org B employees who recognized that flags were banned to the lowest of 18.4 percent of employees in Org D who correctly identified that poppies were not banned. No significant findings emerged with regard to the public/private sector ($\chi^2 = 2.01$, $df = 1$, $p = ns$) or the Catholic/Protestant divide ($\chi^2 = 1.09$, $df = 1$, $p = ns$). The private sector Org B achieved the highest average correct percentage score (78.7 percent), but at the same time the other private sector Org D had the lowest average score (43.8 percent). Likewise, while Protestants in Orgs A, B and D had higher correct percentage scores, this was not the case in Org C where Catholics achieved higher correct scores. However, as with knowledge of the correct responses regarding informal (Table I) and formal (Table VI) grievance procedures, once again, the majority-minority differential emerged in all organizations, in that the majority group (whether P or C) had a better understanding of the policies than the minority group ($\chi^2 = 5.20$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$).

Discussion

The first and second research objectives of this study examined employee familiarity with formal and informal organizational policies designed to deal with sectarian grievances at work, and the extent of employee knowledge of rules relating to banned insignia across organizations. Generally, employee knowledge in these areas was found to be very poor across all four organizations. In relation to informal grievance procedures, the correct response rate was no better than chance, in that in only two instances were correct scores above 50 percent obtained, and indeed the overall average correct score across all organizations was just over 37 percent (Table I). In other words, some two-thirds of the entire sample in this study did not know the proper procedures to follow when a grievance was still at an informal stage. This indicates

Table XI.
Correct interpretation of
flags and emblems policy
regarding banned items

	Org A			Org B			Org C			Org D			All Orgs (percent)	
	Total correct (percent)	C	P	Total correct (percent)	C	P	Total correct (percent)	C	P	Total correct (percent)	C	P		Sum (percent)
Q: Which of these items are banned at all times of the year?														
Flags associated with community conflict in Northern Ireland ^a	21.4	38.1	59.5	40.1	55	95.1	35.4	21.5	56.9	27.3	45.5	72.8	71.1	
Poppies ^b	34.9	43	77.9	39.4	50	89.4	41.5	35.4	76.9	7.9	10.5	18.4	65.7	
Emblems associated with community conflict in NI (badges, Ribbons, etc) ^a	17.4	37.2	54.6	39.1	50	89.1	23.1	20	43.1	46.8	14.8	61.6	62.1	
Crucifixes ^b	29.1	37.2	66.3	31.7	40.7	72.4	41	38.5	79.5	9.1	14.3	23.4	60.2	
Gaelic Athletic Association sports tops ^a	12.8	32.6	45.4	39.1	49.5	88.6	26.2	20	46.2	19.5	39	58.5	59.7	
Glasgow Celtic and Rangers soccer jerseys ^a	14	33.7	47.7	39.1	52	91.1	10.8	18.5	29.3	24.7	44.2	68.9	59.3	
Shamrocks ^b	27.1	30.6	57.7	16	30	46	33.3	35.9	69.2	9.1	14.3	23.4	49.1	
Jesus Saves/Christian Union badges ^b	18.8	29.4	48.2	20.7	37.4	58.1	16.9	7.7	24.6	11.7	11.7	23.4	38.7	
Average percent	21.9	35.2	57.1	33.2	45.5	78.7	28.4	24.7	53.1	19.5	24.3	43.8	58.3	

Notes: ^aThese items were not banned by the organizations; ^bthese items were banned by the organizations

that much more concerted efforts are required by organizations to communicate their relevant policies and procedures. The responses relating to the set time frame for an organizational response once a formal grievance procedure was initiated were worse, with less than 20 percent of responses being correct (Table VI). While employee knowledge of banned emblems was better, with an average correct response rate of 58.3 percent (Table XI), again there was room for considerable improvement, especially in relation to items such as Christian insignia and shamrocks where the correct overall response rate fell below 50 percent. These results are in line with a common finding from audits of various sectors (Tourish and Hargie, 1998), that in most organizations there is an information shortfall.

In terms of organizational comparisons, few trends emerged, indicating that the lack of information was a structural feature of organizational life. Public sector organizations (A and C) scored higher than the private sector companies (B and D) on correct informal grievance procedures (Table I). Also in the two public sector organizations, “trainers” were the third main source from which employees indicated that they received their information about informal grievance procedures, yet in the private sector companies they were not one of the listed sources at all (Table II). However, perhaps the most interesting finding was that across all organizations the majority group (whether P or C) had a better understanding of policies and procedures than the minority group. Further research is required to ascertain whether or not this is a consistent finding, and, if so, to gauge the underlying reasons. It may be, for example, because the majority group feels more “proprietary” and therefore has more interest in understanding the operative corporate context. Alternatively, previous research (Hargie and Dickson, 2004) has shown that when there is a religious imbalance in an organization the only insignia displayed therein is that of the majority, with members of the minority group reluctant to show any signs or symbols of their allegiance. This means that it will be members of the majority who are more likely to breach existing policies and procedures, since only they will display emblems or raise potentially divisive topics for discussion. As such, it is probable that employees who may have breached regulations and to have been warned or sanctioned for so doing will be members of the majority. Their same-religion colleagues are then more likely to check exactly what is permitted and what is forbidden.

The four organizations in this study all had a clear majority-minority imbalance, and this is not atypical in NI. This suggests two things. Firstly, private and public sector employers need to take greater steps to ensure more balanced workforces. It is recognized that given the divided territorial nature of the population and the reluctance to cross boundaries, this will not be easy. For example, one study (Sheehan and Tomlinson, 1998) found that, while both Cs and Ps were willing to work in an organization in which they were in the minority, such willingness decreased markedly when the workplace was perceived to be in the territory of the other side. Secondly, managers should make efforts to ensure that the minority group in their particular organization is more fully apprised of rules and regulations. This, in turn, could increase their sense of “ownership of” or “belonging to” the company.

The third objective of this study was to chart the temporal, geographical and personal dissemination of information concerning formal and informal grievance procedures. Accordingly, a separate part of the ECCO examined the sources, channels, location and timing of communication on policies. This illustrated that there was a

diversity of communication mechanisms within organizations, suggesting no specific strategy in place to inform staff of procedures surrounding sectarianism. With regard to the methods and modes of information dissemination, it was clear that there was too much emphasis upon informal sources and channels, in the form of colleagues conveying information during casual conversations. The ECCO revealed that all organizations needed to be more proactive in ensuring that information was disseminated from managerial sources and through formal channels. With more informal "grapevine" communications there is a greater likelihood of distortion (Karathanos and Auriemmo, 1999), and indeed this may well explain some of the findings of this study regarding misinformation about regulations and procedures.

The final objective of this study was to evaluate the relevance of an ECCO approach to the operational investigation of anti-sectarian rules and regulations in workplaces. An ECCO questionnaire was developed to test staff knowledge of in-house policies relating to formal and informal grievance procedures, should issues of a sectarian nature arise. Respondents were presented with courses of action that could be followed, and organization-specific time-frames within which incidents should be formally acknowledged, and had to select what they believed to be the correct options. They were also required to identify which emblems were or were not banned by the organization. In this way, the extent of employee knowledge could be assessed. In addition, the ECCO obtained responses in relation to when, where, and through which channels information in these areas was disseminated.

The findings from this investigation showed that the ECCO method had a number of advantages. It was effective in charting the precise level and depth of employee knowledge, and in clearly highlighting deficits that should be remedied. For instance, patterns of majority-minority knowledge differentials, and an over-reliance by employees on informal communication channels for obtaining information, clearly emerged from the ECCO. These would have been difficult to glean by other methods. Another advantage of ECCO is that it is a flexible research method that can be tailored to tap employee knowledge about organization-specific data. Its adaptability allows for implementation across a wide variety of contexts and for a range of purposes, including the evaluation of existing systems or services and the diagnosis of organizational shortcomings. In this way it can be tailored to measure precise performance in organizations. In the present study, the ECCO provided specific feedback to the organizations involved about employee knowledge of existing policies and practices pertaining to sectarianism. Using this format as a template, researchers can investigate a wide range of aspects of information flow in organizations.

The ECCO can also generate findings that are unexpected by the investigator, such as the majority-minority knowledge differentials in this investigation. It also charts major recurring problems and elicits inherent difficulties in communication channels, thereby offering recommendations for change. In the present study, one example of this was the over reliance on informal communication channels. The questionnaire also facilitates benchmarking, in that future ECCOs can be carried out to measure relative improvements, or decrements, in employee knowledge. On a wider scale, as in this study, by carrying out parallel ECCO investigations it is possible to make broader conclusions about the general state of workplace knowledge in a particular realm.

On the other side of the balance sheet, however, the ECCO is a time consuming research procedure. Its design involves considerable liaison with managers, and, in this

study, concerted investigation of written procedures. The Questionnaire also has to be operationalised in such a way that it is not seen as a “test” of employees, but rather an opportunity for them to provide feedback. In both senses it is far from an “easy option” for investigators. Perhaps, this is a main reason why researchers have tended to avoid this method. Other problems with the ECCO approach should also be noted. As with all self-report methods, it is subject to the distortions of those who provide the data. Finally, as with most quantitative methods, it produces numerical data but is lacking in any underlying respondent explanation or interpretation of the causes of these.

One limitation of the present study was that all employees were treated as one homogenous group. However, there is some evidence (Kock and McQueen, 1999) to indicate that employees involved in different types of organizational process may prefer information to be disseminated in different ways. Likewise, no differences were charted in relation to gender or age of employees. Future research therefore needs to stratify the employee sample to produce a more fine-grained analysis of employee attitudes in this field.

Organizations are in essence systems for co-ordinating human interaction, and feedback, in turn, is essential for the effective functioning of any organizational system (Downs, 1988). With the advent of e-communications, employees in many corporations are faced with a blizzard of information, so that, as noted by Axelrod (1999) “There is more information to manage just to keep up.” Indeed, organizational communication research has often been construed (Conrad and Haynes, 2000) in terms of an information exchange cluster, involving, *inter alia*, messages, networks, uncertainty, load, and technology. The management and communication of information is, therefore, central to organizational success. For example, having carefully formulated workplace policies in place is of little import if employees are unaware of them. Indeed, a common theme (Hargie *et al.*, 2004) in communication research is that employees complain that they have not been informed of key corporate issues, while senior managers insist that they have invested a great deal of time in explaining them. Whether the poor levels of appreciation of policies and procedures relating to grievance procedures, that we found, is indicative of a more general lack of knowledge of organizational formalisation in those workplaces that we investigated is an interesting question, but one that awaits further study.

One problem here is that important information may get lost in the information blizzard. This means that managers need to check that key messages are reaching, and being understood by, relevant staff (Hogard and Ellis, 2006). In their research into the effects of audits, Hargie *et al.* (2002) concluded that: “The use of audits to measure the effects of information provision would appear to be a useful means of sharpening an organization’s communication strategy.” As shown in this paper, one particularly valuable audit methodology in this respect is the ECCO, which allows managers to assess the breadth and depth of employee knowledge of specific topics, and also to chart how and in what ways this information has been disseminated. It is therefore a potent and invaluable feedback method which can assist organizations in their quest for excellence in communication. While the potential for this method in communication research continues to be recognised by reviewers (Zwijze-Koning and de Jong, 2005) there has been a dearth of actual empirical studies in this field. The inter-cultural aspect of the present study will be of interest to many corporations, given the increased globalization of organizations, with rapid increases in migration across national

borders. This has resulted in an expansion of multi-cultural workforces (Ayoko *et al.*, 2004) which, in turn, has caused problems for organizations (Stockdale and Crosby, 2004) especially in relation to the management of diversity (Kundu, 2003). The present investigation is therefore timely, in that it demonstrates how the ECCO approach can be employed to contribute to the resolution of emergent communication problems.

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