

Virtual Meetings for Societal Communication in Nigeria

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Abstract

In the Nigerian situation there are many associations established for the satisfaction of the additional goals of people in society which cannot be met through communication with only family, friends or colleagues. Before the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, members of such associations usually met physically until taken unawares by the lockdown in the year 2020. While majority of the associations simply waited, others resorted to virtual meetings using some social media platforms during the lockdown, a practice that has gained much popularity today because of some of its obvious advantages over physical meetings. Meanwhile, developments around the globe are in support of physical meetings giving way to virtual meetings and since Nigeria is not an Island in itself this paper's objective is to shade some light on the purposes of communication in associations, discuss some of the problems of the transition from physical meetings to the New Normal by making some suggestions through the engagement of a narrated review of literature in a chronological order with findings that affirms that despite the challenges being experienced by Nigerians now, it is possible to successfully transit to the New Normal being the way to go now in the near future. The recommendations made include sensitization of members of association meetings on the benefits of virtual meetings and the engagement of virtual meetings alongside physical meetings until every member is comfortable enough to transform to the virtual platform

Keywords: Associations' meetings; communication, physical meetings, Transit, New Normal.

Introduction

Communication in society is imperative if there is to be any development whatsoever, at individual, group or societal levels. Communication is necessary for the satisfaction of all the many purposes or needs that lead to the achievement of the goals of people in society for diverse purposes in satisfaction

of physical, emotional, religious, psychological, educational and social needs be it at informal, semi-formal and formal settings.

People in society exist and operate both at individual and group levels. At individual levels, many people either live with family or friends rather than alone, hence, oftentimes they communicate with other people at their homes and also at the organisations where they work with colleagues and associates or they may be at school where similar communication takes place. Often, because of the very many purposes and complexity of societal communication people's needs extend beyond communication at home, school and workplaces which necessitates their forming groups or associations to satisfy one need or the other at which they meet on a regular basis in order to actualize the aims and objectives of the groups.

Within the Nigerian context, there are very many groups or associations popularly referred to as meetings based on tribes, alumnus of institutions, religion, sports and occupations, for instance, for which meetings are held regularly for the achievement of the goals of their members whom by extension are the people in society. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, people usually met at such associations' meetings physically until the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown took the world unawares and many associations' meetings were put off completely while the others eventually mobilized and held virtually. As things stand today the entire world has not remained the same after the pandemic as it has imposed emergency lifestyle adjustments on the world (Folarin & Akorede, 2020) so that we now have what is referred to as the New Normal in organizations and associations' communication that is technology driven. Meanwhile, many organisations as well as associations have discovered the advantages of meeting virtually over the physical ones and are cashing in on it with the projection that the engagement of the New Normal will continue to increase. In the case of the social and religious associations some of them have also resorted to meeting virtually but not without some attendant problems.

Since, communication, whether written or oral forms the basis of any association activity and human existence in its entirety, this article has the objective to ascertain the purposes of communication in associations, discuss some of the problems of the transition from the old to New Normal communication and to proffer relevant suggestions to enhance communication in such fora for the satisfaction of the objectives of the associations and by extension enable an improved societal communication for people in society.

Purposes of Societal Communication

Communication has endless purposes to satisfy in society but within this context, just a few would suffice including the following according to Onjewu, 2020.

Communication is necessary for the achievement of goals. Whatever the goal people in society intend to achieve, be it personal or in groups such as in the different fields of human specialization or sports, religion, etcetera, is only possible through interaction with the people who matter which, in essence, is communication.

Also, people are able to affect others and vice versa in a variety of ways through communication. The struggle to be heard and understood by one another is a continuous one. The way people feel about others or the things around them, what they want others to know or do for them, how they or others are to go about it does not achieve anything until communicated which is done through one person educating or notifying another and in response, earns a satisfaction, entertainment, persuasion or even anger, depending on the circumstance.

Moreover, in associations just as in organisations, the roles of individuals are classified in terms of their communication duties. The general overall assessment of their success is determined by the effectiveness of the information flow they adopt. Usually, an effective vertical and horizontal internal communication helps a great deal towards their success.

Furthermore, effective communication is important for the development of an associations by helping their members, especially those at the helm of affairs, to perform their basic functions of planning, organising, motivating and controlling their activities.

Nonetheless, every individual member of associations needs to be able to effectively communicate with others, to earn a good self-esteem, the desired reputation and good-will to easily resolve misunderstandings or misconceptions if and when they occur.

Emergence of the New Normal Communication

The main cause of the emergence of the New Normal Communication across the globe is the Covid-19 lockdown which came upon humanity suddenly without giving much room for people to decide on other options paved the way for the use of the various social media platforms like Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, Free Conference, YouTube Live, Facebook Live, WhatsApp, Telegram and the likes in order to get many things including office work, commerce, schooling, official meetings as well as formal, informal and semi-formal meetings. Also, as a result of the restriction of movement during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown when people could not freely visit family and other associates but still needed to remain in communication with them the social

media again came to the rescue. Presently, people are still with some reservations pertaining to attending large gatherings or meetings because of the frequent rumours of new Covid-19 variants or strains.

Meanwhile, the need to satisfy all the purposes above and more makes it necessary to still meeting in the associations as was the case in Nigeria prior to the Covid-19 era. The Pandemic has not taken away the goals that people in society need to achieve by belonging to the associations, so, as it has become less attractive to engage physical meeting, the way to go is to embrace virtual meetings now referred to as the New Normal in communication.

Aside the foregoing global problem, locally, some additional factors have also supported the emergence of the New Normal Communication in Nigeria, as follows:

Insecurity

In many states of Nigeria including Kaduna, Benue, Niger and Zamfara to mention but a few, incidences of insecurity such as banditry, kidnapping, herders and farmers' clashes have become so rampant that people no longer feel free to move about freely for work, study, farming and other businesses as a result. In the case of Kaduna at a particular time in the year 2022 after the bombing of the Abuja to Kaduna bound train and another attack on a flight with staff of the kaduna airport, there was no air nor train-travel in and out of the city and state capital except road travels which was not attractive then because of the frequent incidents of kidnappings on it. Als, as a result of insecurity, Federal and states governments are turning to the virtual rather than physical meetings despite the porous state of the Nigerian space which could easily be breached by cyber criminals (Adepetun & Onyedika-Ugoeze, 2018)

Petroleum scarcity

Petroleum scarcity is another problem that has lingered in Nigeria for decades now at determinable times like during festivities and other times spontaneously. During such times Nigerians spent a lot of time or days on queues at the Fuel stations so it is a common excuse at physical meetings for members to call in and say that they are on such a queue which unfortunately is one of the realities living with us for decades now.

Distance

Distance is also one of the factors which meeting members complain about because meetings attract membership of people whose homes

maybe in different parts of the same town or beyond and while a meeting venue is within close proximity to some members' residencies, it may be too far for other members to conveniently attend regularly. Hence, receiving apologies based on distance is also not an uncommon feature at meetings since what such members may decide to do on a regular basis is to formally inform the house and then try to attend the meetings either every other month or on quarterly basis as they can afford to.

Poverty

Nigeria is still a third world country with a very low GDP so that more people live below the poverty line (World Bank, 2022; Nigeria's Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Ucha (2010) affirms that Nigeria when compared to other countries in sub-Saharan African is worse off in most of the economic and social aspects which does not undermine but rather enhances the need of people to belong to associations alike as the other people who are comfortable, particularly in the case of tribal and religious ones but sometimes due to lack the poor ones are not able to attend the associations' meetings regularly

The world as a global village

In consonance with the idea of the world being a global village (Ryan, 2012) people in Nigeria with contemporaries from across the world have similarly formed themselves into associations of diverse interests which also need to also meet regularly although it is not feasible to always do so physically. For instance, many educational and professional associations hold Webinars through zoom. Also, some people live in one country and work remotely at another without overemphasizing intercontinental, intra continental, intra country and inter country trade and commerce activities

Requirements for Virtual Meetings

In the literature McLeod (ND) affirms that several of the skills people possess and use for physical meetings can be transferred to the new communication platforms, for instance, a skilled presenter could learn how to successfully manipulate the Zoom for a successful participation in virtual meeting. By and large, the following requirements are necessary for attendees of virtual meetings:

Owning smart phones, tablets or laptops

Every participant at a virtual meeting needs to hook up using either a smartphone, tablet or laptop which has on it the appropriate App(s) being used for meetings like WhatsApp, Telegram Zoom and Google

meeting because without any of such devices it is practically impossible to have an avenue to join a virtual meeting. The literature provides an encouraging outlook on Smartphone users in Nigeria with a forecast of growth to more than 40 million in 2025 although 10 - 20% of the population now uses smartphones (Tailor, 2023) which is a positive trend towards entrenching virtual communication in the country.

Data

In addition to having a gadget with the right application downloaded on it data is required to facilitate the ability to connect to any virtual meeting so in Nigeria there are many networks including 9mobile, MTN, Airtel and Glo mobile which people subscribe to in order to have the data needed. Data is however more expensive in Nigeria compared to western countries and is predominantly unstable (Hensen, 2021) making people at times not to enjoy the benefits of a data bundle purchased. Infact, Nigeria is said to have the highest number of people who can't afford data in the world (Sahara Reporters, 2022)

Knowledge about Phones and Apps

It is one thing to have a smartphone and another to know how it works as many people with smartphones do not know how to operate them in terms of having the ability to download the necessary applications for virtual meetings, being able to navigate the apps and engage them for a virtual meeting, but, such people could be taught or helped.

Finance

Finance is of course a very basic requirement to the operation of virtual meetings it seems that virtual meeting participation is capital intensive if seen from one perspective considering the cost of getting a smartphone and subscribing to data in order to operate the applications for virtual meetings. However, people generally don't buy separate phones for virtual meetings if they already have one that could be used as well as data hence on the other hand the same phone or gadget used for virtual meetings are put into several other uses which eventually lowers the overhead cost of investing on virtual meetings. Also, when people consider the cost of commuting with the time and risk involved, virtual meetings are certainly cost effective.

Convenient space/home office

It is advisable for people who engage in virtual meetings to create a convenient space in their homes or offices that are devoid of noise and other unnecessary distractions which most Nigerian's living and working situations do not provide for.

Setbacks to Virtual Communication

Certain factors including the following found among Nigerians are obvious black eyes in the smooth transition from physical to virtual meetings:

Ignorance

Majority of our people are still ignorant about latest developments around the globe on the one hand while on the other hand they are very slow in accepting change because of ignorance of their benefits. It is not uncommon to insist that everything they are engaged with must remain the way they have been and go out of their way to make sure nothing changes.

Illiteracy

The illiteracy level in Nigeria is still very high such that many members of some associations may be illiterates who need education and much exposure to participate in virtual meetings and although this may not be immediately feasible, it may not be entirely impossible if some necessary measures are put in place

Poverty

Since the lockdown era, many people have been laid off their employments as part of the coping strategies by their employers which has increased the poverty level of our nation. Poor people are unlikely to afford smart phones, data, a suitable place with the other necessities for virtual meetings.

The love of getting together

Nigerians enjoy to fraternize a lot by getting together under a strong tradition of mutual caring and responsibility (Commisceo Global Ltd, 2020) to discuss their associations' business and then share either light or heavy refreshments. Even when people live in better places than meeting venues or can afford better entertainment than is served at meetings, they oftentimes still yearn to attend the meetings just for the love of it and to share moments with the other meeting members,

Conclusion

Since the COVID-19 era life around the globe has not been the same and may never be. In the Nigerian situation as usual it may be difficult to fall in tune with the New Normal in communication but we don't have a better choice than to begin immediately at however little scale is possible which in the long run will be better than maintaining the status quo since there is a consensus among stake holder to allow virtual meetings to replace the physical ones as the New Normal in Communication. Also, in view of the insecurity, finance and health

challenges out there, the comfort zone of people cannot be overemphasized nor compromised.

Suggestions

In view of our peculiarities in Nigeria, the following strategies may be helpful to ease peoples' transition from physical to virtual meetings:

- Associations could commence sensitisation of their members on the benefits of virtual meetings.
- Associations could subscribe to group data which in the long is cheaper for every member to afford.
- Association could arrange for soft loans for members to access for the purchase of smartphones.
- Associations could initially engage virtual meeting at intervals until every member could be taken on board before fully resorting to it.
- Associations could send the vital documents like minutes in good time and let meeting members know before hand
- Meeting members should ensure they receive the relevant documents and peruse them thoroughly before hand.
- When it is time for meetings, members should get well dressed and mentally compose themselves to attend
- Members should ensure that they test their data networks' strength and also that they have enough data for the duration of meetings.
- Members should ensure that they find a suitable and convenient venue that is devoid of unnecessary distractions for their virtual meetings

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