Assessing the Applicability of Integrated Communications: a Systemic Approach

By Yi-Chen Lin

This study tackles the problem of how communication functions can be integrated and made more effective in organizations through Total Quality Management (TQM), systems thinking and pluralist approaches. Particularly, the revised integrated communications model that has the capability to review, operationalize and evaluate the integrated communications approach in a systemic view will also be presented.

Although there is widespread agreement that the function of integrating communications is exceedingly important, the focus is usually on organizational processes rather than the personnel and procedures that can effectively integrate the communication disciplines. The research described in this paper brings to light the main issues affecting the quality of Integrated Communications (IC) and a new Integrated Communications Model (ICM) for assessing the applicability of integrated communications - using a systemic approach. The model is systemic not only because it focuses on an interactive process, but also because it considers organizational design, organizational culture, and organizational politics. This Integrated Communications Model can help tackle the three main issues of integrated communications in the research:

- How organizations can implement effective communications
- How organizations can identify their specific stakeholders
- How organizations can evaluate the effectiveness of their communications with their specific stakeholders.

This article discusses how this model is relevant around the world. Moreover, this model is presented because significant support can be garnered as to why it works.

Integrated Communications and Total Quality Management

A variety of references note that Total Quality Management (TQM) can be helpful for integrated communications (Duncan and Moriarty, 1997; Gronstedt, 1996). Some methods of TQM, including using flow charts, check lists and lists and benchmarking, can help organizations improve the IC process. Ideas such as "create constancy of purpose," "institute training" and "breaking down barriers between departments" (Deming, 1986) can also help to improve IC function. Though the literature of TQM provides the ideas and methods to set up effective communication, TQM still has problematic concerns. TQM may improve organizational processes, however the issues of IC in other dimensions must be also considered. TQM cannot address how to design an organization as an adaptive system in a way that will allow a quality culture to exist. Moreover, TQM does not address who benefits in the dimension of organizational politics. This study not only focuses on organizational process improvement of IC, but also trying to tackle the issues of IC in the other dimensions. All four dimensions (Flood, 1995) must be considered in order to help achieve the ideal dynamically balanced organization for IC. However, in order to build an effective systemic approach and to avoid introducing other weaknesses, it is now necessary to implement an in-depth consideration of systems-thinking and pluralist approaches to enhance TQM and make the IC model even more effective.

Systems Thinking and Pluralist Approaches

Since the 1930s, there have been three competing models of management in organization theory: the traditional approaches, human relations theory, and systems theory. However, recognizing the deficiencies of both the traditional approaches and human relations theory, the systems theory has now grown to a position of prominence in management theory.

Flood and Jackson (1991) state, "Systems thinking developed, therefore, as an alternative to mechanistic thinking, and proved
itself more satisfactory for explaining not only complex biological but also social phenomena." Systems thinking draws a blueprint to tackle the main issues of IC and helps to build a systemic approach of IC. Midgley (1996) said, "Pluralism involves viewing all methods as complementary, addressing different kinds of questions." Pluralism was seen as a way to re-establish the credibility and utility of management science. It came to be appreciated that different methodologies had different strengths and weaknesses, which should be known and utilized in a complementary way.

There are many methods and approaches that are used in marketing and public relations. If these two departments are combined into a more effective IC function, then there will need to be a critical pluralist recognition to select the most appropriate and effective methods. Also, the potential for further enhancing IC by mixing and combining methodologies must be realized.

Some approaches to pluralism in systems thinking could be used to improve IC programs such as Total Systems Intervention (TSI), a system of evaluation methodologies, triple loop learning, and critical appreciation. TSI was presented by Flood and Jackson (1991), to provide direction to systems practitioners wishing to relate and distinguish between methodologies in a theoretically informed manner. The three phases of TSI are labeled "creativity," "choice" and "implementation." Creativity is to "use systems metaphor as organizing structures to help managers think creativity about their enterprises." Choice is to "choose an appropriate systems-based intervention methodology to suit particular characteristics of the organization's situation as revealed by the examination conducted in the creativity phase." Implementation is to "employ a particular systems methodology to translate the dominant vision of the organization, its structure, and the general orientation adopted to concerns and problems, into specific proposals for change" (Flood and Jackson, 1991). TSI's principles and philosophy can enhance an IC approach to set up effective communication in organizations.

A. Gregory (1996) presented a system of methodologies that may help in the evaluation of procedures. Four main models (goal based, culture based, system-resource based, and multi-actor based evaluation) in evaluation theory were introduced and compared. Gregory's evaluation ideas will be used to suggest ways to assess the effectiveness of communications. Triple loop learning aims to increase "the fullness and deepness of learning about the diversity of issues and dilemmas faced" (Flood and Romm, 1996). It includes three questions:

- Are we doing things right?
- Are we doing the right things?
- Is rightness buttressed by mightiness and/or mightiness buttressed by rightness?

Triple loop learning can help IC increase the fullness and deepness of learning about issues and dilemmas faced and ways of managing them. Gregory (1992) made it clear that no single method currently available within the systems domain is able to provide adequate support to the four aspects of IC (empirical-critique, historical-hermeneutic, self-reflection, and ideology-critique). Interventions must mix different methods so these four aspects can all be included. The critical appreciation may help IC researchers to engage in a critical appreciation process to observe, converse with others, self-reflect, and conduct critiques of society.

Research Method

This study proceeded in three phases. First, a qualitative approach that included a literature review was employed. The purpose of this phase was to get basic knowledge about the topic. Secondly, a quantitative approach that included the development of a questionnaire was conducted. In the same phase, a qualitative approach that included interviews with several managers from five different companies was conducted to find the issues of IC in Taiwanese companies. Finally, three companies were selected to participate in the case studies. Qualitative research interviews were conducted to validate the research findings, to assist in the interpretation of the results, and to develop a new model of IC.

Research Findings

The research findings can be separated into two parts: Questionnaire Findings and Interview & Deep Case Studies Findings.

Questionnaire Findings

- Where do organizations stand on the integration scale in Taiwan?
Which aspect of IC is effective or weak in organizations?

Questionnaires were sent to the top 50 Taiwanese manufacturing companies and top 30 Taiwanese service companies. A total of 40 responses were received from 80 questionnaires, and 38 of the returned questionnaires were suitable for use in this study. Using the set of questionnaires and a combination of postal requests, two research questions are analyzed:

Where do organizations stand on the integration scale in Taiwan?

In order to get an idea to what extent any company is practicing IC, respondents were asked to circle the number in the questionnaire which best reflects how the company operates with regard to the statements. The average score of these 38 organizations is 3.88, with little variation relative to the type of organizations. A score of 3.88 signifies above average IC practices, but with much room for improvement.

Which aspect of IC is effective or weak in organizations?

The average score of each question of the questionnaire was counted and is summarized in Figure A. The average score 4.039 in the aspect of awareness integration is the highest. The average score 4.034 in the aspect of stakeholders-based integration is also very high. This implies that most of the companies think that they identify their key stakeholders and send messages very well. It is worth paying attention to the aspect of evaluation integration, because the average score, 3.597, is the lowest. It suggests that the companies do not seriously evaluate the communication strategy. Therefore, a good evaluation system is recommended.

Interviews and Deep Case Findings

Based on the questionnaires, interviews, and case studies, the research findings can be summarized in the following:

Large differences were evident between the companies in their use, knowledge of, and desire to use appropriate methods for generating awareness of their diverse environments and in the degree to which their communications activities were integrated.

Companies think that the organizational mission is communicated well internally, but there is a failure in the external unification of their image.

There is often no evaluation or integration of these important communication activities resulting in poor access and lack of user friendliness in about 40% of the companies. Two departments may duplicate efforts - perhaps creating the same database twice instead of sharing one database between two departments without effective internal integration.

It is necessary to create a list of all customer contact points within a company. Some companies had an insufficient grasp of the advantages gained from integration of the communication activities and tended to have a customer-focused attitude from quality management systems as a result of ISO 9000 certification.

The interviewees felt that it is important to know who their stakeholders are; however, the companies do not use special methods to identify their stakeholders.

Although the importance of evaluation is recognized, knowledge of and use of methods is limited, the necessary organizational processes are lacking, the communication design is inadequate, and there is no team culture – as departments and sales managers are often rivals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awareness integration</th>
<th>Customer-based integration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average score: 4.039</td>
<td>Average score: 3.878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.395</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.316</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>3.789</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.657</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unified image</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average score: 3.875</td>
<td>Average score: 4.034</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.868</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.816</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.036</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.789</td>
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<tr>
<td>Database integration</td>
<td>Evaluation integration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average score: 3.807</td>
<td>Average score: 3.597</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.789</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.947</td>
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<td>11</td>
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Figure A. Summary of Findings
Revised Integrated Communications Model (ICM)

This section presents the new model for applying and assessing integrated communications in organizations. It is named the Integrated Communication Model (ICM), and it provides a framework to review, operationalize and evaluate the process and effectiveness of integrated communications. The purpose of ICM is to help organizations set up effective communications through a new and comprehensive business model. To fully implement ICM, organizations may be required to move away from some of the practices that currently bring them success and adopt a new way of thinking. The business environment is growing more complex, and ICM can help organizations identify the main issues of IC in such a complex environment. Moreover, management approaches can be reviewed through ICM, and the best choice between current practices and modified practices could be made. This revised ICM not only achieves the integration aspects of current IC models, but also can tackle the three neglected issues of IC. The model is also able to tackle the deficiencies and poor choice of methods for awareness integration, unified image, database integration, customer-based integration, stakeholders-based integration, and evaluation integration. This revised ICM can tackle these issues because it uses the critical systemic approach of Total Systems Intervention (TSI) (Flood, 1995), which looks systematically at the organizational needs and selects the most appropriate methodologies, including the three questioning loops of triple loop learning (Flood and Romm, 1996) and evaluation methodologies (Gregory, 1996). This overcomes the identified deficiencies of current IC models, which are neither critical nor systemic in approach.

This article proposes the revised ICM illustrated in Figure B. Following Flood (1995), the ICM has three modes of operation: 1) the Critical Review Mode (CRM), 2) the Problem Solving Mode (PSM), and 3) the Critical Reflection Mode (CREFM). The problems of organizational process, design, culture and politics in each aspect of IC must first be identified. These problems will be reflected to the three modes in order to get the best solution in a systemic view. Six aspects of IC are considered within each of the three modes of operation in an interactive and interdependent way using the TSI problem solving cycle of creativity, choice and implementation. The CRM can help decision-makers to identify competence and effectiveness of the variety of approaches in IC, because it reviews critically methods in each aspect of IC through creativity, choice and implementation. The problem-solving mode employs a system of methods for solving IC problems in each aspect from the critical review mode. It also operates through creativity, choice and implementation. The critical reflection mode uses creativity, choice, implementation and critical appreciation to help IC problem-solvers to reflect upon the adequacy of the output of the problem-solving mode. This process involves asking the three questions of triple loop learning in each aspect of IC and using the problem solving cycle of creativity, choice and implementation within each learning loop. It is recognized that it may be advantageous to creatively mix methods and parts of methods in a multi-methodological way. Mingers and Gill (1997) determined that multi-methodology was an "approach that held rich promise for the more effective use of systems and operational research approaches." The curves that connect the three modes identify that, given the dynamic nature of organizations, the three modes together are an ongoing process and should be periodically studied.

The center is IC success, which is surrounded by four dimensions of organizations. IC success cannot be achieved until all four dimensions of organizations have been considered. The lines from the three modes and six aspects, pointing to the center (IC success), imply that each aspect can influence the success of an IC program. The lines from the center, pointing outward to the three modes indicate that the experience gained from an IC success can help to refine and improve the different aspects in an IC program and hence help to increase the possibility of further IC success.

Midgley (1997) pointed out that methods could be designed by mixing and combining methodologies to be more flexible and effective. Midgley and Milne (1995) suggested a "rolling program" to decide the boundaries of who should be interviewed. In their words, "The issue of who was to be interviewed was resolved through a rolling program of recommendations, where each interviewee recommended others until most of the people being recommended were people who had already been seen." In particular, the rolling program can be used to address the second issue of IC – how to identify their specific stakeholders in organizations. As mentioned earlier, Gregory (1996) presented an analysis of the theoretical underpinnings of four types of evaluation approaches and formulated a system of evaluation methodologies showing in what circumstances each can be more appropriately used. This helps to tackle the third issue of IC – how to help organizations to evaluate the effectiveness of their communications with their specific stakeholders. Gregory's (1992) critical appreciation can enhance IC in four aspects (empirical-critique, historical-hermeneutic, ideology-critique, and self-reflection) to observe, converse with others, self-reflect and conduct critiques of society. This study used quantitative and qualitative methods to achieve these four aspects. All the methods used in each aspect of IC can
be reviewed, chosen and reflected. Based on the results of the questionnaires, interviews and case studies, the issues of IC are identified and ICM and tackle these issues with a holistic perspective.

Characteristics of a good ICM procedure include: 1) Analysis of the IC issues through four dimensions of organizations, 2) Awareness of environment, communication tools and IC program, 3) Agreement of a coherent mission and image, 4) Evaluation of database, 5) Identification and analysis of contact points, 6) Identification and understanding of key stakeholders, 7) Evaluation of relationships between organizations and key stakeholders. In particular, the process must go through CRM, PSM, and CREFM to review, employ and reflect management approaches used in the IC program. The ICM is different from other models because a systemic approach of IC is presented. Different management approaches could be reviewed, chosen and reflected within a comprehensive way through ICM. The benefits of using ICM are: 1) All four dimensions of organizations are fully taken into account, 2) Strengths and weaknesses of management approaches can be identified through ICM and the best choice can be made, and 3) Managers can think about what they are doing from a systemic perspective.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the following points have been identified from the study:

- **Identification of IC aspects**

The investigation of the relationships between these aspects and IC adds to the understanding of the IC approach. This knowledge can help managers in taking appropriate action to make the best use of the IC approach.

- **Use of "rolling program"**

The rolling program from Midgley and Milne (1995) is used to identify key stakeholders in the ICM. Furthermore, the relationships between companies and their stakeholders can be evaluated through questionnaires and interviews.

- **Use of "system of evaluation methodologies"**

The results from the questionnaires, interviews and case studies show that many organizations do not have a good evaluation system. The ICM can bring in Gregory's system of evaluation methodologies to help tackle this issue.

- **Development of a Systemic Approach of IC**

This study adds a systemic approach to IC which represents a major contribution to theory and practice for four main reasons: by providing a more systemic and comprehensive understanding of integrated communications than present models; by offering a means of critically reviewing and selecting appropriate methods for all aspects; by enabling the critical evaluation of the impact of aspects of integrated communications continuously; and by presenting a systemic approach of IC for explaining and heightening integrated communications success.

The IC model has been developed using both literature sources and from interviews with company managers. The full IC model has not yet been applied in an organizational case study. However, the individual methodologies used in the IC model have all been used individually in companies with success. For example, the application of the methodologies chosen by TSI and triple loop learning in organizational situations is reported in Flood and Jack-
son (1991). The report of use of the rolling program is in Midgely and Milne (1995). The use of evaluation in companies is in Greg-
ory (1996). The IC model employs a systemic appreciation to
review all possibilities in order to identify where to use the indi-
vidual methodologies most appropriately to improve the potential
for IC success. Therefore, there is good reason to believe that the
model will work for most organizations.

At the time of publishing, some of the managers who were
interviewed expressed interest in implementing the model, but
they will need assistance from a person with knowledge of the IC
model and of the individual methodologies. Implementation will
require intense and lengthy involvement. The companies are not
aware of the systems thinking approach or of the individual
methodologies that are available and could be used to help their
situations. Also, even if they have heard of some of the method-
ologies, they do not know where and how they should be most
appropriately applied, which the IC model can help determine.

Future plans are to apply the model fully in an organizational
setting. The ICM can help to improve the communication quality
for companies to get ISO 9000 status, or think differently for their
electronic commerce focus on customer relationship management.

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YI-CHEN LIN earned an MBA degree at National Cheng-Kung Uni-
versity of Taiwan in 1993, and then lectured at the Southern Taiwan
University of Technology. During this time, she received a scholar-
ship to conduct a study on network and strategic planning. She was
also awarded one of the National Science Committee quota awards
for her master’s thesis. In 2000, she was awarded a Ph.D. in Manage-
ment Systems and Science at the University of Hull in the United
Kingdom.