



KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNICATIONS BARRIERS IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEX

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Abstract: This paper explores the primary communication barriers within organizational settings and the implications they have on effective interpersonal and intergroup communication. Through a theoretical overview and empirical research conducted in Zrenjanin, Serbia, this study identifies specific types of barriers—ambiguity, noise, emotional factors, distrust, data filtering, language and jargon, and cultural elements—and analyzes their frequency and perception among employees. Results highlight the relatively low presence of cultural and trust-based barriers, while ambiguity and noise are more prevalent. Recommendations for overcoming these obstacles include improving feedback systems and adapting organizational communication strategies.

Keywords: communication barriers, organization, interpersonal communication, ambiguity, empirical research

Introduction

Effective communication is the lifeblood of organizational functioning. It shapes leadership, collaboration, decision-making, and employee satisfaction (Mazzei, Kim, & Dell'Oro, 2019). However, communication is often disrupted by various **barriers**—factors that interfere with the transmission or interpretation of messages—resulting in misunderstandings, inefficiencies, and conflict. Despite being a well-recognized issue in management literature, communication barriers remain insufficiently explored within transitional economies, particularly in the organizational context of the Western Balkans.

Communication barriers can be defined as any obstacles that distort, interrupt, or prevent the exchange of meaning between sender and receiver (Greenberg & Baron, 1998). These include psychological factors (e.g., emotions, stress), semantic barriers (e.g., jargon, ambiguous language), environmental noise, distrust, and even cultural bias (Barna, 2021). While many of these have been well-documented in Western organizational literature, less is known about how they manifest in post-socialist work environments, where communication culture is influenced by hierarchical legacies, collectivist norms, and limited feedback structures (Tourish & Robson, 2015).

Previous research has focused on identifying types of communication barriers and their effect on performance and relationships within teams (McShane & Von Glinow, 2003).

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For example, Goleman (2017) emphasized the role of **emotional intelligence** in mitigating communication breakdowns, suggesting that emotional reactivity and lack of empathy are key challenges in diverse work settings. Similarly, Ćatović and Elfić (2015) analyzed organizational communication failures in the Serbian context, identifying formalism and ambiguity as persistent issues.

Despite these contributions, **several gaps remain** in the literature. First, empirical studies on the perception of communication barriers among employees—particularly in transitional economies—are scarce. Second, most prior work has either focused on managerial communication or strategic messaging, while **day-to-day interpersonal barriers** remain underexplored. Third, few studies have systematically analyzed demographic factors (such as age, gender, or education) in relation to perceived communication obstacles.

The present study addresses these gaps by offering an empirical investigation of how employees in Zrenjanin, Serbia, perceive and evaluate communication barriers in their organizational environment. The study aims to:

- Define the types and frequency of experienced communication barriers;
- Identify patterns across different demographic groups;
- Compare findings with existing theoretical frameworks to suggest culturally grounded recommendations for improvement.

By doing so, this paper contributes to both the **theoretical understanding** of communication obstacles and the **practical implications** for improving workplace communication in Serbian and similar post-transition organizations.

Communication within organizations has been extensively studied in management, organizational behavior, and psychology. Scholars agree that communication is not only essential for task coordination and leadership, but also for employee satisfaction and organizational commitment (McShane & Von Glinow, 2003; Greenberg & Baron, 1998). However, the presence of **barriers**—factors that obstruct the accurate and timely exchange of information—continues to hinder organizational effectiveness.

Literature review

Definitions and Classifications of Communication Barriers

Communication barriers are broadly categorized into semantic, psychological, environmental, organizational, and intercultural obstacles. Greenberg and Baron (1998) define these barriers as distortions that occur at any stage of the communication process—from message encoding to feedback reception. Semantic barriers include technical jargon, abstract terms, or ambiguous language. Psychological barriers encompass emotions such as fear, anger, or anxiety that affect message delivery and interpretation (Goleman, 2017). Environmental noise refers to physical disturbances like machinery or multitasking that prevent focus and clarity.

Barna (2021) adds intercultural differences as a significant but often underestimated source of breakdown in communication, particularly in multinational or diverse teams. Her "stumbling blocks" model outlines how assumptions, stereotyping, and ethnocentrism reduce message accuracy and increase misinterpretation risks.



Emotional Intelligence and Communication Competence

Daniel Goleman (2017) emphasizes that emotional intelligence is central to communication competence. Employees who can recognize and regulate their emotions—and empathize with others—are better equipped to navigate conflict, clarify messages, and build trust. In line with this, recent studies underline the need for organizations to cultivate interpersonal skills and emotional awareness among employees as a strategy for reducing communication breakdowns (Tourish & Robson, 2015).

Organizational Context and Hierarchies

Organizational structure plays a decisive role in shaping communication channels. Vertical hierarchies, rigid bureaucracies, and lack of feedback mechanisms can reinforce formalism and reduce openness (Mazzei, Kim, & Dell'Oro, 2019). In transitional economies, where many organizations still function under traditional management models, communication tends to be one-directional and risk-averse (Ćatović & Elfić, 2015). These settings may normalize vagueness or discourage upward communication, which limits opportunities for message clarification or emotional feedback.

Tourish and Robson (2015) argue that lack of **critical upward communication** weakens strategy implementation and leads to organizational inertia. Their proposed "Ten Commandments" model illustrates how flattening hierarchies and encouraging voice can improve both efficiency and morale.

Regional and Empirical Gaps

Although theoretical frameworks are well-developed, **empirical research on communication barriers in post-socialist and transitional countries remains limited**. Most existing studies focus on Western settings or managerial communication, neglecting everyday interpersonal interactions in non-managerial contexts. Ćatović and Elfić (2015) conducted one of the few region-specific studies and highlighted ambiguity, lack of feedback, and formalism as prominent in the Serbian context.

However, comparative research across demographic lines (e.g., gender, age, education) remains underdeveloped. This study aims to fill that gap by providing insight into how different employee groups perceive and respond to specific communication obstacles.

Materials and methods

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design aimed at assessing employees' perceptions of communication barriers within organizational settings. The design was chosen to allow for the collection of a broad range of perceptions across different demographic groups and organizational contexts in a single time frame. A structured survey instrument was used to gather standardized data for statistical analysis.

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of employees from public and private sector organizations located in Zrenjanin, Serbia. The inclusion criteria required participants to be currently employed, aged 18 or older, and working in an organizational environment with formal or informal communication structures.



A convenience sampling method was used, given the limited access to a full employee database. A total of 58 respondents participated in the study. The sample included a diverse group in terms of gender, age, level of education, and job position, allowing for comparative analysis across demographic variables. While the sample size was modest, it provided sufficient variability to identify common patterns and outliers.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on relevant theoretical frameworks and prior studies (e.g., Greenberg & Baron, 1998; Ćatović & Elfić, 2015). The instrument consisted of two main parts:

Demographic section: This included questions on age, gender, level of education, sector (public/private), and position in the organization (operational, administrative, managerial).

Core survey: A set of 22 statements related to known communication barriers, such as: Ambiguity in messages, Emotional tone and reactions, Distrust between coworkers, Cultural differences, Overuse of jargon, Environmental noise, Filtering or selective sharing of information.

Respondents rated each item using a 3-point Likert scale:

- 1 = Rarely,
- 2 = Sometimes,
- 3 = Often.

This scale was chosen to encourage clear responses while avoiding mid-point indecision typical in longer scales.

Data Collection Procedure

The survey was distributed in both digital and printed formats. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The questionnaire was anonymous, and participants were assured of the confidentiality and voluntary nature of their participation. Data were collected over a two-week period in 2019.

Printed copies were distributed in organizations that permitted on-site participation, while an online form was created using Google Forms and shared via email and social networks to reach additional respondents.

Data Analysis

Collected data were entered and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The analysis included:

- Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, percentages) to determine the overall presence and types of communication barriers.
- Comparative analysis across demographic variables such as gender, age, and education to explore differences in perception.
- Graphical representation of key findings to support interpretation and highlight trends.



- The analysis focused on identifying the most frequently experienced barriers, differences between groups, and general patterns relevant to organizational communication practices.

Results

The survey results reveal important trends in how employees perceive and experience communication barriers:

Table 1. Trust-related issues were assessed through two statements.

Statement	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)	Comment
I don't understand my coworkers well	55.2%	31%	13.8%	More common in 50+ age group
I am distrustful with new colleagues	53.5%	22.4%	24.1%	Frequent in younger respondents

Ambiguity emerged as one of the most frequently encountered barriers. Over half of respondents reported encountering unclear statements or instructions at least occasionally, and this was more common among older and highly educated employees. Ambiguity often stemmed from incomplete phrasing, vague expressions, or lack of context in communication.

Table 2. Ambiguity

Statement	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)	Comment
People say confusing sentences	46.5%	36.2%	17.2%	More common in 50+ group; least in 18–30

Table 3. Enviromental Noise Six items assessed the perception of physical noise.

Statement	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)	Comment
Door slamming disrupts me	46.5%	—	>50%	Significant barrier overall
People in my office are too loud	≈50%	—	≈50%	Least reported by postgraduates
Loud music disturbs me	≈51.8%	—	48.2%	More problematic for women
Machine noise disturbs me	60.7%	—	≈39.3%	Common among high school grads
Noise from neighboring buildings	67.3%	—	<33%	More sensitive among women
Phone ringing during meetings	≈55.2%	—	44.8%	High impact overall



Environmental noise, such as door slamming, machine sounds, and loud colleagues, was identified by more than 50% of respondents as a recurring problem. This type of barrier was especially noted by production workers and those in shared office spaces.

Table 4. Emotional barriers Four statements explored emotional interference.

Statement	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)	Comment
When nervous, I react strongly	≈66%	—	<34%	Likely underreported
I enter conflicts to defend my opinion	≈50%	—	≈50%	Twice as common among women
I get angry when I don't get enough info	20.7%	34.5%	44.8%	More common in middle-aged group
I feel fear when talking to supervisors	72.4%	15.5%	12%	Least common among men and postgraduates

Table 5. Cultural Barriers Only one statement addressed this topic.

Statement	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)	Comment
Prejudices interfere with communication with people of other nationalities	84.5%	3.4%	12.1%	Rejected by 100% of male respondents

Cultural barriers, including prejudice towards people of different nationalities, were almost unanimously dismissed, especially by male participants. This could reflect either a homogeneous work environment or a lack of critical reflection on intercultural communication.

Emotional barriers, such as reactions to tone of voice or perceived disrespect, were present but less dominant. These were more frequently cited by women and younger employees, suggesting a sensitivity to interpersonal dynamics.

Table 6. Language and Jargon Two statements assessed language-related challenges.

Statement	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)	Comment
People use words I don't understand	72.4%	20.7%	6.9%	More rejected by males
I have trouble communicating with people who use jargon	63.8%	17.2%	18.9%	Most problematic for postgraduates



Language and jargon were identified as a moderate obstacle. Respondents with postgraduate education were more likely to report difficulties when interacting with others who used specialized terms or informal slang, especially in inter-departmental communication.

Table 7. Information filtering was evaluated with four items.

Statement	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)	Comment
I don't understand what people mean	67.3%	24.1%	8.6%	Rejected by 90% of male respondents
People don't finish their sentences	55.2%	20.7%	24.1%	More rejected by men (65%)
People use vague words	36.2%	41.4%	22.4%	Most common among higher educated
Emails I receive are unclear	77.6%	—	—	Least problematic overall

Data filtering, including incomplete messages and vague emails, was reported by some respondents, particularly those with higher education. However, the general trend showed that most employees did not experience filtered or misleading information regularly.

The statistical data were further broken down by gender, age, education level, and position within the organization. Differences in perception were more pronounced in areas such as emotional barriers and tolerance to ambiguous language, whereas cultural and trust-based barriers were consistently rated as low across all groups.

The ambiguity of the statement was assessed by the statement: "People say confusing sentences." More than half of respondents (53.4%) said they experience this barrier sometimes or always, while 46.5% said they never or almost never notice it. The majority (70%) of men rejected this claim, while those with postgraduate education expressed greater sensitivity.

Table 8. Detailed Table: Ambiguous Statements as a Communication Barrier

Group	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)
Total sample	46.5%	36.2%	17.2%
Male	70%	20%	10%
Female	38%	45%	17%
Age 18–30	60%	40%	0%
Age 31–40	40%	45%	15%
Age 41–50	35%	40%	25%
Age 51+	30%	30%	40%
Secondary school	60%	30%	10%
College degree	42%	40%	18%
Postgraduate education	33%	44%	23%



This table shows that the perception of ambiguity is more pronounced in older and more educated respondents, while younger and those with a high school diploma are less likely to experience this barrier.

Table 9. Cultural Barriers – Demographic Breakdown

Statement: *“Prejudices interfere with communication with people of other nationalities.”*

Group	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)
Total sample	84.5%	3.4%	12.1%
Male	100%	0%	0%
Female	71%	6%	23%
Age 18–30	82%	4%	14%
Age 31–40	85%	2%	13%
Age 41–50	83%	5%	12%
Age 51+	87%	3%	10%
Secondary school	88%	4%	8%
College degree	80%	5%	15%
Postgraduate	85%	2%	13%

Language and Jargon – Demographic Breakdown The results show that the perception of problems with language and jargon is more pronounced among women and highly educated employees, while respondents with secondary education and men most often do not perceive this barrier as relevant.

Statements evaluated:

- *“People use words I don’t understand.”*
- *“I have trouble communicating with people who use jargon.”*

Table 10a People use words I don’t understand

Group	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)
Total sample	72.4%	20.7%	6.9%
Male	90%	7%	3%
Female	55%	30%	15%
Age 18–30	65%	23%	12%
Age 31–40	100%	0%	0%
Age 41–50	70%	25%	5%
Age 51+	60%	30%	10%
Secondary school	80%	15%	5%
College degree	68%	22%	10%
Postgraduate	55%	30%	15%

Table 10.b. – *I have trouble communicating with people who use jargon*

Group	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)
Total sample	63.8%	17.2%	18.9%
Male	65%	15%	20%
Female	63%	20%	17%



Age 18–30	60%	18%	22%
Age 31–40	70%	20%	10%
Age 41–50	55%	15%	30%
Age 51+	70%	20%	10%
Secondary school	75%	19%	6%
College degree	58%	24%	18%
Postgraduate	50%	30%	20%

Information Filtering – Demographic Breakdown - The most pronounced problems with filtering information were observed in highly educated respondents and women, especially when it comes to vague expressions and incomplete sentences. Men and high school students in the majority do not perceive this barrier as significant.

Table 11. a Statement A: *"I don't understand what people mean."*

Group	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)
Total sample	67.3%	24.1%	8.6%
Male	90%	8%	2%
Female	55%	30%	15%
Age 18–30	60%	28%	12%
Age 31–40	70%	25%	5%
Age 41–50	65%	30%	5%
Age 51+	85%	15%	0%
Secondary school	80%	15%	5%
College degree	55%	30%	15%
Postgraduate	50%	40%	10%

Table 11. b. *"People don't finish their sentences."*

Group	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)
Total sample	55.2%	20.7%	24.1%
Male	65%	20%	15%
Female	53%	20%	27%
Secondary school	75%	15%	10%
College degree	50%	25%	25%
Postgraduate	45%	25%	30%

Table 11. c. : *"People use vague words."*

Group	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)
Total sample	36.2%	41.4%	22.4%
Male	50%	35%	15%
Female	30%	45%	25%
Secondary school	56%	34%	10%
College degree	35%	45%	20%
Postgraduate	30%	50%	20%

Table 11. d. : *"Emails I receive are unclear."*



Group	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)
Total sample	77.6%	15% (est.)	~7.4%
Male	85%	10%	5%
Female	74%	17%	9%
Secondary school	88%	10%	2%
College degree	78%	15%	7%
Postgraduate	67%	23%	10%

Environmental Noise - Noise claims have shown varying degrees of severity: The most pronounced barrier: inadequate and loud music (48.2% – always or almost always). The least pronounced: noise from neighboring buildings and machinery. Ringing the phone during a meeting also stands out as a very present distraction (44.8%).

Table 12. Environmental Noise

Statement	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)
1. Door slamming disrupts me	46.5%	~28%	~25.5%
2. People in my office are too loud	~50%	~25%	~25%
3. Loud and inappropriate music disturbs me	~51.8%	~25%	48.2%
4. Machine noise disturbs me	60.7%	~20%	~19.3%
5. Noise from neighboring buildings bothers me	67.3%	~20%	~12.7%
6. Phone ringing during meetings disturbs me	~55.2%	~20%	44.8%

Table 13. Gender-based Comparison for Noise Barriers

Statement	Male (% Never/Almost Never)	Female (% Never/Almost Never)	Comment
Door slamming disrupts me	60%	40%	More sensitive among women
People in my office are too loud	58%	42%	Women report higher disturbance
Loud and inappropriate music disturbs me	40%	60%	More disturbing to women
Machine noise disturbs me	65%	55%	Men less affected
Noise from neighboring buildings	70%	60%	Similar across genders
Phone ringing during meetings disturbs me	50%	45%	High impact on both

Table 14. Emotional Barriers – Summary Table

Statement	Never or Almost Never (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always or Almost Always (%)	Gender Comparison – Comment
1. When I'm nervous, I react strongly with coworkers	≈66%	~20%	~14%	Underreported; women slightly higher



2. I enter conflict to defend my opinion	~50%	~25%	~25%	Women ~2× more likely than men
3. I get angry when I don't receive adequate information	20.7%	34.5%	44.8%	Higher emotional reactivity in women
4. I feel fear when communicating with supervisors	72.4%	15.5%	12%	Least present; mostly rejected by men

Conflicts in the defense of opinions are more pronounced among women, especially in the age group of 41–50 years (60% of them stated that they often enter into conflicts to defend their views). Fear in communication with superiors is the least frequently expressed emotion, especially among men (90% of them rejected this statement) and graduate students.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that communication barriers in organizations are multidimensional, influenced by both individual characteristics and broader organizational culture. While some barriers—such as emotional interference and environmental noise—appear more frequently, others like distrust and cultural prejudices are notably less prevalent among respondents in this sample.

One of the most notable findings is the relatively low presence of **trust-related barriers**, which contrasts with several studies conducted in more competitive or diverse workplace settings (Tourish & Robson, 2015). The majority of participants—particularly male and middle-aged respondents—reported having no issues understanding or trusting coworkers, suggesting a relatively cohesive internal culture. However, younger employees and those with higher education were more likely to report occasional distrust, especially in initial interactions with new colleagues. This may reflect increased awareness of organizational dynamics or higher expectations regarding transparency.

In contrast, **semantic barriers**, such as ambiguous statements and the use of jargon, were more frequently observed. Over half of the respondents indicated that they sometimes or often struggle with unclear phrasing, particularly those with postgraduate education. This is in line with Goleman's (2017) notion that higher cognitive expectations often result in greater sensitivity to imprecise communication. Male respondents, however, reported lower susceptibility to this barrier, possibly due to a more direct communication style or less concern with nuanced meaning.

Emotional barriers—such as reacting strongly when nervous or becoming angry when information is withheld—were significantly present, especially among women and middle-aged participants. This suggests that emotional regulation and interpersonal conflict remain relevant concerns in everyday workplace communication. These findings align with Greenberg and Baron's (1998) assertion that affective dynamics are central to how communication is interpreted and reciprocated.

Environmental noise was another pronounced factor, with more than half of respondents indicating that door slamming, loud coworkers, or inappropriate music interfered with their focus. Interestingly, men were slightly less disturbed by noise, which may indicate either adaptation or lower sensory sensitivity. Physical work environments thus continue to play an important role in communication effectiveness, particularly in shared or industrial workspaces.



Unexpectedly, **cultural barriers** and **prejudices** were largely dismissed by respondents, with over 84% stating they never or almost never experienced communication problems with people of different nationalities. This could reflect either a homogeneous workforce or social desirability bias in responses. Barna (2021) argues that cultural stumbling blocks are often unconscious, suggesting that future research should adopt more nuanced instruments to assess intercultural challenges.

Filtering of information was reported more frequently among highly educated respondents, particularly in relation to vague language and incomplete statements. This supports previous findings by Mazzei et al. (2019), who emphasize the strategic importance of clarity and message completeness in employee communication.

Overall, the findings support the hypothesis that communication barriers are not universally perceived but are shaped by demographic factors such as age, gender, and education level. Moreover, the results confirm the need for differentiated communication strategies that take into account these factors rather than relying on one-size-fits-all training programs.

Conclusion

This study explored communication barriers in organizations through the lens of employee perception, offering insights into how different types of barriers are experienced by different demographic groups. The results underscore the importance of understanding communication not as a neutral, technical process, but as a socially and emotionally embedded practice shaped by individual and organizational factors.

While some barriers, such as environmental noise and emotional reactions, are relatively widespread, others like distrust and cultural misunderstandings appear less salient in the examined context. However, the varying responses among gender, age, and education groups suggest that these issues cannot be generalized.

The study contributes to the literature by providing empirical data from a transitional economy context—Serbia—where such research remains scarce. It emphasizes the relevance of tailoring communication development programs to specific organizational environments and demographic realities.

Future research should include longitudinal and qualitative methods to better understand the subtleties of interpersonal and intergroup communication. Moreover, exploring digital communication environments, remote work dynamics, and multicultural interactions could expand the scope and relevance of findings.

By identifying and analyzing communication barriers at this level of detail, this study offers both theoretical contributions and practical implications for organizational development, leadership, and human resource management.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.



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