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# FACT SHEET



**BASICS OF EMPLOYEE  
COMMUNICATION**

## **INTRODUCTION - BASICS OF EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION**

According to [www.exploreHR.org](http://www.exploreHR.org), studies have shown that 70% of mistakes in the workplace are a direct result of poor communication.

Communication in its simplest form, is seen as the exchanging of information by means of a certain medium.

Thus, when referring to Employee Communication, also known as Internal Communication, we refer to the exchanging of information between organisational members. Ideally this exchange of information takes place between two or more individuals, regardless of roles played in the organisation. By using the word “exchange” we already refer to a two-way communication model, which implies that more than one party will be involved and that participating individuals will be both receivers and senders of the exchanged information.

The HR function is one of the most important functions in organisations, as part of its role is to contribute to employees’ professional development and create a motivating environment in which individual and organisational goals may be achieved. Communication is the vehicle through which organisational effectiveness is achieved. Good communication is the basis for good relations between the employer and its employees. Employees must be kept constantly well-informed and employee communication is the means to do this.

In organisations we communicate for various reasons, for example to help each other, to inform each other, and to understand each other, and although we have been doing this for hundreds of years, poor communication within the workplace is still a daily issue. So what does internal communication entail?

### **1. THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION**

Communication can be broken down into three categories:

- the verbal message (the message we deliver, which might be a question asked for statement made to another person);
- the vocal message (the tone of voice we use to convey the message); and
- the visual message (our body language).

We use our tone of voice to portray the urgency of something. When using something like email as communication medium, one must still be careful, as a certain tone of voice is also applicable for the written word. Your choice of words and USING CAPITAL LETTERS for example, can create a tone of voice without you literally saying something.

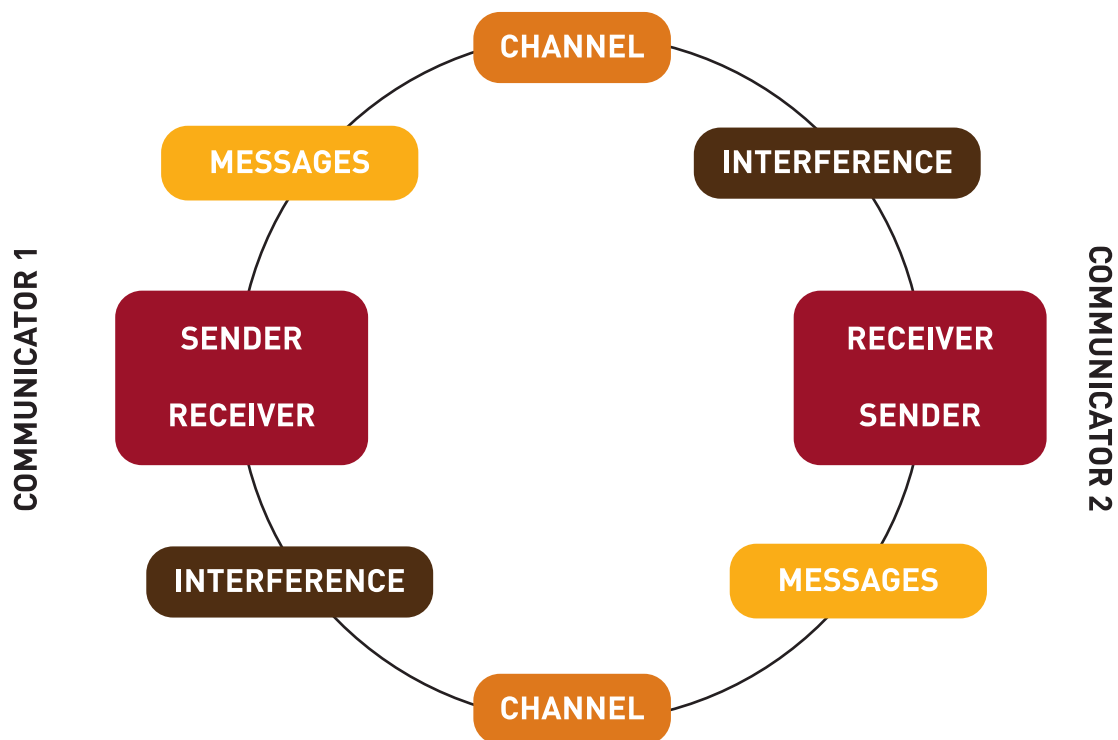
Clearly, body language does not play a role when typing an email or writing a verbal message, but

in an interview or a very important meeting for example, using the right body language is of the utmost importance. A simple message might be interpreted in a number of different ways as a result of the way that we choose to communicate.

Communication is thus far more complex than we realise.

According to Tubbs & Moss (2010)<sup>1</sup> human communication can briefly be explained as the process of creating meaning between two or more people. The following diagram shows the process.

**Figure 1: The Tubbs Communication Model**



The Tubbs Communication Model as shown above, can be seen as the simplest human communication event. It only involves two individuals namely Communicator 1 and Communicator 2. Communicator 1 is initially the sender of a message having Communicator 2 then being the first receiver, but both parties are simultaneously being influenced by one another, making the sender/receiver roles, overlapping roles. Keep in mind that while communication is taking place and these roles are constantly being exchanged, a relationship between the two communicators is being formed.

Communicator 1, the sender/receiver, is trying to transmit a message to Communicator 2. When we look at messages, it can be a verbal or nonverbal message. This message can also be intentional

<sup>1</sup> Tubbs, S. & Moss, S. 2010. Human Communication: Principles and Contexts. 11th ed. Singapore: McGraw-Hill.

or unintentional. Whatever the situation may be, this message needs to filter through a certain channel in order to reach Communicator 2, the receiver/sender. Channels are the mediums we use to communicate, as will be explained later on. The important factor to remember according to Tubbs and Moss is that each channel has a specific purpose and that each channel possesses merits and limitations.

The model also shows interference before the message reaches the receiver. Tubbs and Moss describe interference as anything that distorts the information transmitted to the receiver or distracts the receiver from receiving the message. Interference can then be broken down into two types: Technical interference and Semantic interference. Technical interference is described as the factors that cause the receiver to perceive distortion in the intended message. These factors can include a sender who mumbles, a bad telephone line or a lot of background noise making it difficult for the receiver to hear the sender.

Semantic interference is when the receiver does not attribute the same meaning to the signal that the sender does. Tubbs and Moss explains that no two people will attribute exactly the same meaning to any word. Semantic interference can especially take place between individuals having different cultural backgrounds. Interference can thus be found in the context of the communication, in the channel, in the sender or in the receiver.

As the message now filters through the channel and interference, it finally reaches Communicator 2, the receiver/sender. Depending on the channel used to transfer the message, visual perception and listening is an essential aspect of message reception. Tubbs and Moss explains that when Communicator 2 listens, four processes should occur: giving attention, hearing, understanding and remembering. Depending on the interference that was present while the message was being sent, Communicator 2, the receiver/sender, will then process the message and get a response/feedback ready, making Communicator 2 the sender and Communicator 1 the receiver. This whole process as explained above, then proceeds until Communicator 1 is the sender again and so the process will continue until consensus is reached and the initial communication goal is reached. Notice how the exchanging of communicator roles opens the door to two-way communication.

Two-way communication is thus found when one person is the sender and transmits a message to another person, who becomes the receiver. When the receiver gets the message, they send back a response, acknowledging the receipt of the message. But what is one-way communication and why isn't it recommended?

One-way communication takes place when information is only transferred from the sender to the receiver, not giving or wanting the receiver to become a sender and give feedback. A model to explain one-way communication would look like this:



Figure 2: Depiction of a One-way Communication Model



One-way communication is not a process, as it is only one-way and no “feedback loop” is created. As with a two-way communication process, there is still a sender, message, channel, interference and a receiver present, but the difference is that the role as sender/receiver is not exchanged.

The biggest problem that occurs when the receiver is denied a response, is that the message received might not be understood in the way the sender intended it to be. This is problematic for the communication process moving onwards, as the incorrect information could now be distributed. A problem thus might occur as the message filters through the channel and interference, but this problem won't be discussed in one-way communication as the message the receiver receives is the message that he/she will work with. In other instances it might happen that the receiver, due to cultural differences for example, doesn't understand the sender, but the sender is not aware of this as the sender is not interested in communicating with the receiver, but rather communicating to the receiver.

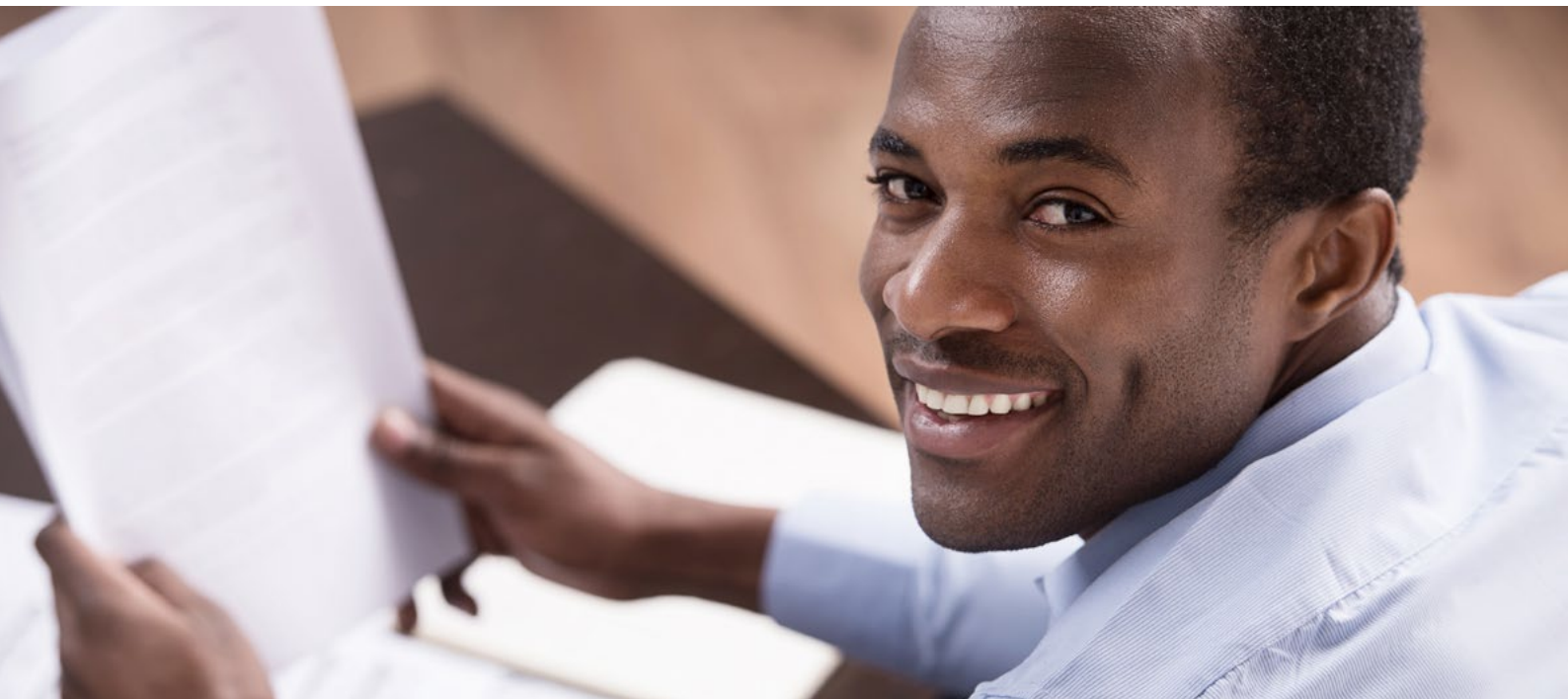
As the purpose of communication is to get your message across to others clearly, how would you know if you achieved your communication goal if you deny feedback by enforcing one-way communication?

## 2. COMMUNICATION CLIMATES IN THE WORKPLACE

A communication climate can be described as the invisible concept of how communication is conducted within an organisation. The communication climate found in an organisation can thus demonstrate whether horizontal, upward and downward communication is either being encouraged or hindered. Three types of communication climates can be found in organisations: the “dehumanising climate”, the “happiness for lunch bunch” climate and the “open” climate.

### De-humanising Climate

The de-humanising climate is the worst climate to have in an organisation as it prevents social interaction among the workforce and is only concerned about production. In other words, this is not the ideal environment for communication. The de-humanising climate can destroy morale in the workplace as employees are unhappy, have little enthusiasm and don't want to be at work. In this climate employees may feel unappreciated and feel that they will be easily replaceable. Employees working in this climate also work independently as communication between employees is not encouraged. On the contrary, management will try to restrict internal communication as they feel less communication will force employees to get their work done and not ‘fool around’ at work. According to Richmond et al., (2013) one is more likely to find this type of communication climate in the for-profit sector.



## Happiness for Lunch Bunch Climate

In contradiction to the de-humanising climate, the happiness for lunch bunch climate focuses more on the employee and the environment they work in than the tasks that have to be accomplished. In this environment the organisation wants the employee to be happy, but unfortunately little is accomplished and no strategic communication takes place in this climate. Peer communication takes place, but the problem is that employees won't give adequate feedback for fear of upsetting their fellow employees. In this climate, employee welfare and peer communication is important, but little time is spent worrying about change or communication between supervisors and subordinates. According to Richmond et al., (2013)<sup>2</sup> one is more likely to find this type of communication climate in the nonprofit sector.

## Open Climate

In the open climate, personal growth and development is promoted. In this climate, communication between subordinates, supervisors and peers is encouraged and the workforce work together as they feel they can trust and be honest with one another. Good communication is promoted and therefore this is a very productive climate to work in. In this climate both the employee and the task at hand is a priority to the organisation. This is a supportive, non-threatening climate where employees feel comfortable and enjoy their work. This is the ideal climate for employees as the organisation is concerned about both the tasks and the employees themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Richmond, A., Peck, V., McCroskey, J.C. & Powell, L. 2013. Organisational Communication: Picking a Communication Destination. <https://bruinsh.wordpress.com/picking-a-communication-destination/> Date of use: 1 October 2015

## Remedial action

The chapter in the Women's Report goes into some detail on practical steps to remedy any unjustified pay differences uncovered by the audit. Remedies then need to be costed and submitted to governance structures for approval. The role of the Employment Equity Committee should be taken into account in reporting on the results of the audit and remedial action agreed. Communication with employees and managers needs to be carefully planned and, finally, an after action review should be conducted to identify lessons learned and how to feed back those lessons into policies, procedures and practices.

## 3. COMMUNICATION CHANNELS IN THE WORKPLACE

When referring to a communication channel, we refer to the medium used to transmit and receive messages. McLuhan (1964)<sup>3</sup> believes that “the medium is the message”. According to McLuhan, each communication medium, regardless of the content, engages receivers in different ways and affects the scale and pace of communication. Tubbs and Moss state that knowing which medium is best suited for your particular communication needs is key to ensuring that your message is received and understood. We have access to so many communication channels today and it must be ensured that the appropriate channel is used when communicating something. Because the way a message is delivered affects the way the message is received, it often happens that the message intended to be delivered is not necessarily the message that was received. Thus it is of the utmost importance to use the appropriate communication channel when communicating. The type of channel we choose to use when communicating should also be linked to the importance of the message/information. For example, if you need to give an important message to a colleague who is out on a business trip for the week, will you decide to send an email with the hopes that you colleague sees the email in time or phone your colleague about the message, ensuring that the message is received and understood?

Communication channels can be broken down into three categories: print channels, electronic channels and face-to-face channels.

### Print Channels

Communication in the workplace by means of print channels includes memos, newsletter, brochures, reports, policy manuals and annual reports. These channels are mainly used to inform and is therefore one-way orientated communication taking place. The above channels should be used when basic information needs to be given to employees. This will also help employees keep

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<sup>3</sup> McLuhan, M. 1964. Employee/ Organisational Communications: Selection of Media. <http://www.instituteforpr.org/employee-organizational-communications/> Date of use: 5 October 2015

up to date with what is happening in the organisation and make them feel informed.

## **Electronic Channels**

There are three main channels we make use of every day, emails, messaging and telephones. All of these channels are great in promoting day-to-day communication and open the door to two-way communication. Employees are able to obtain information relatively quickly by means of electronic channels. These channels are mainly used to obtain and/or proclaim information. When used appropriately, electronic channels can also make employees feel up to date and satisfied with their access to other individuals in the organisation and access to information.

## **Face-to-Face Channels**

Face-to-face communication is used to reinforce all communications in an organisation. Appropriate face-to-face channels with regard to employee communication will include meetings such as departmental meetings, staff meetings and social events such as team building or lunches. Face-to-face channels create the perfect opportunity for discussions, feedback, questions and brainstorming ideas. It also makes communication more relevant and personal and can help to build understanding. Face-to-face communication should open the door to dialogue and also encourage active listening.

## **4. WHAT CAUSES POOR EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION**



Poor communication occurs when the sender is unable to convey the message to the receiver, or the receiver is unable to grasp the message from the sender. After decades of communicating



within organisations we still find communication gaps each day, so why is this? The first step in addressing poor employee communication is identifying communication hindrances. Poor employee communication may take place for the following reasons:

- There are unclear goals of what is expected, therefore lack of information and knowledge;
- There is a diversity of cultures working together, therefore difficulty in understanding each other;
- Not listening actively, thus failing to understand;
- Failing to understand and having too much pride to ask for assistance;
- Individuals may have preconceived ideas, therefore doing what they feel is right and not necessarily what should be done;
- Getting stuck in your own ways thus failing to explore alternatives;
- Not understanding each others' needs and failing to work toward organisational needs;
- Personal issues, which may lead to a bad mood at work, influencing relationships and work ethic;
- Cultural differences;
- The type of climate an employee has to work in;
- Making use of the wrong channels to distribute certain information;
- Interference during communication;
- Communication overload;
- Enforcing one-way communication where dialogue should rather be encouraged.

## 5. EFFECTS OF POOR EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION

Poor internal communication also affects the company's external communication (communication with stakeholders). As stakeholders are integral to a company's existence and progress, poor external communication, especially due to poor internal communication, should be avoided at all times.



There are various opportunities in the workplace for poor communication to take place. It might happen that a very important phone call was missed or an email was not sent to the right person,

once again not only reflecting on poor internal communication, but also having an external effect. It does not matter how minor or major the lack of employee communication is, poor employee communication will strain the productivity of the organization and also influence the organisation's image and reputation. Whether it is written or verbal, poor employee communication can hinder the efficiency of an organisation or a specific department in the organisation, as it delays the process of getting tasks done. Poor employee communication then also impacts employee morale. Employees lack enthusiasm in doing tasks and question the value of what they are doing if communication is poor. This lack of enthusiasm then also circles out to decreased innovation. Employees may feel like their contributions are useless or not on point and therefore suppress their passion and only do what they have to do. This can also cause employees to be unhappy with their jobs and in the workplace, once again decreasing their efficiency and quality of work. Unhappy employees can then lead to frustration, hostility and arguments in the workplace. At the end of the day this causes a high employee turnover, making this vicious cycle repeat itself.

Poor employee communication can therefore cause:

- Inefficiencies, mistakes;
- Lowered productivity;
- Loss of business;
- Poor coordination and cooperation;
- Damaged personal or company image;
- Hostility, frustration, conflict, arguments;
- Dissatisfaction;
- Lowered morale;
- Loss of team spirit; and
- High employee turnover.

## 6. HOW TO AVOID POOR EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION

It often happens that organisations plan endlessly on how to engage with and manage their external audiences and forget about their most important stakeholder, namely their employees. Employees are the people with the power to control the future of an organisation. High-performing organisations therefore make employee communications a priority. According to Boggess (2012)<sup>4</sup>, these organisations know that an engaged workforce makes for a more successful organisation and understand the need to communicate strategically with them. The following tips can assist in achieving effective employee communication:

- Assess your current internal communication methods;
- Check in with employees on a regular basis;
- Ask questions and listen actively;
- Match actions with words;
- Use the appropriate channels to communicate;

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<sup>4</sup> Boggess, S. 2012. 15 Tips for effective employee communication. [http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/15\\_tips\\_for\\_effective\\_employee\\_communication\\_45031.aspx](http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/15_tips_for_effective_employee_communication_45031.aspx) Date of use: 11 October 2015

- Be forthcoming and continuous;
- Notify employees first of any changes before other stakeholders;
- Provide context and explain strategies;
- Make internal knowledge and documents easily available;
- Identify and discuss common goals;
- Send out an internal newsletter;
- Focus on company culture;
- Create a comfortable climate for employees to work in;
- Allow employees the opportunity to recharge;
- Strengthen connections between managers and employees;
- Don't chastise mingling;
- Discourage one-way communication, motivate dialogue;
- Attend conferences as a team;
- Identify and reach out to shy employees;
- Make use of an anonymous "suggestion box";
- Hold teamwork in high regard;
- Take inventory of your own communication skills;
- Celebrate employee achievements;
- Thank employees personally for hard work.

## CONCLUSION

Communication is an ongoing process and a subject we deal with every day. Even though we see communication as a natural process taking place, within the workplace communication should be looked at as a function that needs to be managed. Communication has the power to make or break other functions within an organisation. In order to address communication problems, a climate where two-way upwards, downwards and peer communication is encouraged, should be created. When individuals have the opportunity to talk and know someone is actually listening, the reasons why poor communication exists will start surfacing. It is important to keep in mind that interference during the communication process will always be there. One should just learn how to optimise your communication in order to avoid or minimize the effects of such interferences. The first step in improving internal communication, is to open the door to two-way communication/dialogue and the second is to make use of the right communication channels.

**This Fact Sheet was written by Tammy Nicholson, marketing intern with the SABPP. Tammy has an Honours degree in Communication for Social Change.**

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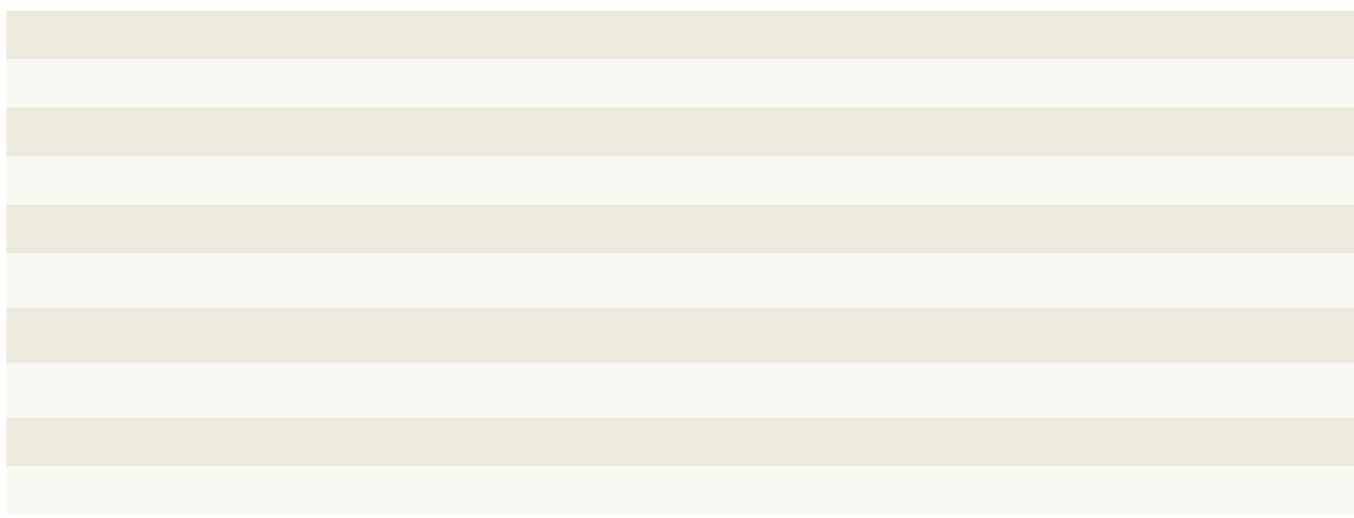
DATE	NUMBER	SUBJECT
<b>2013</b>		
February	1	<b>GAINING HR QUALIFICATIONS</b>
March	2	<b>ETHICS, FRAUD AND CORRUPTION</b>
April	3	<b>NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN</b>
May	4	<b>BARGAINING COUNCILS</b>
June	5	<b>EMPLOYMENT EQUITY</b>
July	6	<b>HR COMPETENCIES</b>
August	7	<b>HR MANAGEMENT STANDARDS</b>
September	8	<b>PAY EQUITY</b>
October	9	<b>COACHING AND MENTORING</b>
November	10	<b>HIV/AIDS IN THE WORKPLACE</b>
<b>2014</b>		
February	1	<b>EMPLOYING FIRST-TIME JOB MARKET ENTRANTS</b>
March	2	<b>PROTECTION OF PERSONAL INFORMATION ACT</b>
April	3	<b>QUALITY COUNCIL FOR TRADES AND OCCUPATIONS</b>
May	4	<b>WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING</b>
June	5	<b>RECRUITMENT – SCREENING OF CANDIDATES</b>
July	6	<b>HR RISK MANAGEMENT</b>
August	7	<b>BASIC HR REPORTING (1)</b>
September	8	<b>BASIC HR REPORTING (2)</b>
October	9	<b>EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT</b>
November	10	<b>SEXUAL HARASSMENT</b>

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DATE	NUMBER	SUBJECT
<b>2015</b>		
February	1	<b>AMENDMENTS TO LABOUR LEGISLATION 2014</b>
March	2	<b>THE REVISED BROAD-BASED BLACK ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT CODES OF GOOD PRACTICE</b>
April	3	<b>LESSONS LEARNED FOR EMPLOYERS FROM CCMA CASES</b>
May	4	<b>EMPLOYEE WELLNESS SCREENING</b>
June	5	<b>CHANGING THE EMPLOYMENT EQUITY LANDSCAPE</b>
July	6	<b>EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERING</b>
August	7	<b>DEPRESSION IN THE WORKPLACE</b>
September	8	<b>EMPLOYEE WELLNESS</b>
October	9	<b>EQUAL PAY AUDITS</b>
November	10	<b>BASICS OF EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION</b>



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