

# Interpersonal Communication of Price-related Information at the Project Inception Stage: An Interview Survey

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## ABSTRACT

The premise upon which this paper is based is that, within the context of information transfer, there has been insufficient examination of the interpersonal communication function. This paper is concerned with the effectiveness of the interpersonal communication process associated with certain communication media utilised in the provision of price-related information at the inception stage of the building procurement process. More specifically, it deals with communication aspects of quantity surveyors' engagement letters and documentation, clients' briefs, and the language of building price forecasting. The paper documents the results of an interview survey concerning the opinions of clients, architects and quantity surveyors.

### Key Words

Communication; price messages; information; building; inception

## Introduction

The building industry exists in a very dynamic and fragmented environment, with individual building project teams consisting of *ad hoc* combinations of clients, architects, quantity surveyors and contractors. These combinations of project participants are closely bound by a mutual information dependency, as information is required and produced during all the phases of the building procurement process from inception to completion.

Information may be defined as data which has been processed and presented in a format which gives it meaning. Information technology is concerned with the collection and collation of data leading to the automatic production of usable information. Clearly, current developments in information technology, for example those concerned with integrated communication networks and advanced media technologies, have enormous import for the collection, processing and dissemination of information within the building industry (Atkin, 1986; Chang and Emsoff, 1988; Baldwin, 1990).

The literature reflects a concern for the technological aspects of information transfer, focusing, *inter alia*, on the derivation of information from raw data for a specific need and the efficient storage and retrieval of such information. Little attention has been given to the *interpersonal communication* of information and the effectiveness of that communication process. Effective information transfer and management systems in the absence of commensurately efficient interpersonal communication systems may impede the decision-making process.

This paper is concerned with the effectiveness of the interpersonal communication process relating to certain communication media utilised in the provision of price-related information at the inception stage of the building procurement process. More specifically, it deals with communication aspects of quantity surveyors' engagement letters and documentation, clients' briefs, and the language of building price forecasting. Such a communication-based approach entails an analysis of the communication sources, receivers, media of transmission, messages, barriers to communication and feedback mechanisms associated with the provision of price-related



information. The study documents the results of an interview survey concerning the opinions of clients, architects and quantity surveyors.

### Models of human communication

Communication may be defined as the process of interaction between individuals in which meaning is created and shared. Various models have been developed to explain the interpersonal communication process. Tubbs and Moss' (1981) model of human communication, depicted in Fig 1, is employed here as it depicts the majority of the concepts necessary for this analysis.

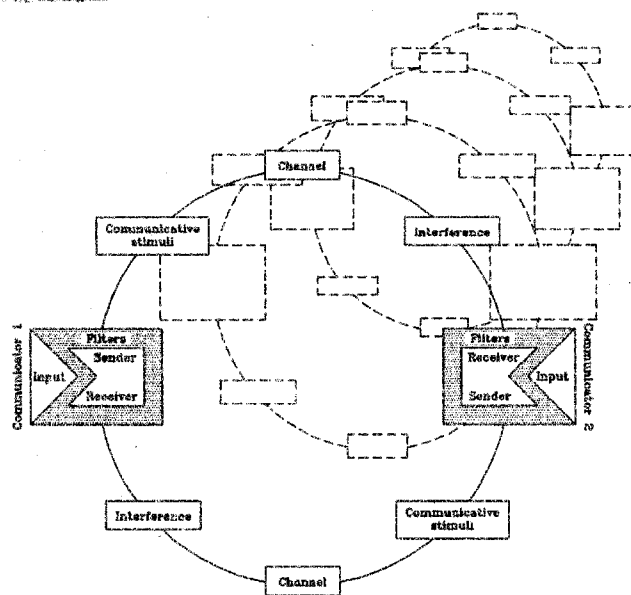


Fig 1 Tubbs and Moss' model of human communication (Tubbs and Moss, 1981)

In terms of this model, stimuli (both past and present) provide communicators with information about the world. While communicators receive varied and ever-changing sensory stimulation, more input is received than can actually be processed by the communicators. Hence, receivers attend selectively to sensory stimulation, the selective attention being represented by filters through which all input must pass. The source transmits a message to the receiver in the form of a communicative stimuli. These stimuli may be verbal, nonverbal, intentional or unintentional. The channel is the medium used by the source to transmit the stimuli to the receiver. Simultaneously with the source message, the receiver receives and makes use of information from a number of different channels and, in general, the more channels used, the greater the number of communicative stimuli transmitted. Upon initiating the message, the source almost always assumes that it has been received. That this is not the case is a function of interference, defined by Cherry (1978) as any disturbance or noise apart from the messages selected and transmitted. Upon receiving the stimuli from the source, the receiver engages in understanding, the process of assigning meaning to the received stimuli. This assigned meaning may, or may not correspond to the intended meaning of the sender.

Reference to Fig 1 *supra* indicates that the interaction between the communicators is represented by a circle. However, with the progression of the communication process, this interaction may be conceptualised as several circles (helixical) depicting the effect of the past on the present or future behaviour. As Dance (1967) observes, the helix represents the concept that communication, while moving forward, is at the same moment coming back on itself and being affected by past behaviour. Communication is seen as ever-changing (dynamic), requiring the active participation of both sender and receiver. The model is convergent in that the source and receiver work together over time to create and share meaning - they converge on shared meaning.

According to Feldberg (1975), *the main responsibility for ensuring that expectations and reactions are congruent lies with the sender or originator of the message*. To facilitate the attainment of congruence, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure that the appropriate receiver is selected, the most appropriate medium is chosen, the message contains the correct content, and that there is an absence of barriers inhibiting the ability of the receiver to accept the message.

### **The communication of price-related information at the inception stage: the theory**

The purpose of the inception stage is for the client to communicate to the professional advisors his or her needs and objectives in initiating the project. The consultants, in turn, must interpret the client's needs, prepare a general outline of the client's requirements and formulate a set of actions to best satisfy those needs. The principal activities of the quantity surveyor at this stage include: receiving and commenting on the client's brief, advising on design/price alternatives and price/quality relationships; and advising on procurement duration.

Central to the provision of price advice by the quantity surveyor is the need to establish the extent of the price advice services to be provided, and the nature and scope of the project. It is essential that the client, architect and quantity surveyor are *ad idem* on these issues. Furthermore, it is desirable that the language used in the communication process is similarly understood by the various participants. Failure to achieve congruence of meaning creates barriers to effective communication and potentially results in the provision of sub-optimal price advice. The mechanisms traditionally employed to achieve this mutual understanding are the quantity surveyor's engagement documentation and the client's brief. The effectiveness of the communication processes associated with these media form the essence of this paper.

In an idealised situation, the communicators are deemed to possess the ability to comprehensively encode the message to be transmitted, being mindful of the characteristics and decoding ability of the receiver(s). Linked to this is the presupposition that the media chosen for transmission are suitable for conveying the intended message, and that any processes utilised to formulate the message are appropriate. The participants are considered capable of decoding the message as it was intended, with an absolute minimum of interference from barriers to effective communication. To minimise the possibility of distortion of messages, communicators are assumed to make full use of feedback mechanisms to ensure that the message sent is the message received ie, total congruity of messages.

### **The communication of price-related information at the inception stage: an interview survey**

To investigate the effectiveness of the communication process associated with the provision of certain price-related information at the inception stage, an interview survey was conducted in Cape Town. This survey, dealing specifically with engagement documentation, the client's brief and the language of building price forecasts, formed part of a more comprehensive research project, the results of which are documented elsewhere (Bowen, 1993).

A sample of ten practising quantity surveyors, ten architects and ten client officials were interviewed. The quantity surveying and architectural respondents constitute small to medium sized practices, predominantly involved in commercial projects in the private sector. Client organisations comprise institutions wielding considerable financial influence in the property development market. The interviews were structured, using a discussion questionnaire and were conducted on a face-to-face basis.

### **Engagement Letters and Agreements**

Ideally, in accepting a professional appointment, the quantity surveyor should write a formal letter of acceptance to the client, formalising the contractual relationship and defining the respective

obligations and responsibilities of the parties. The objectives of such engagement documentation insofar as the provision of price-related information is concerned, include: ensuring client awareness and acceptance of the scope of the price advice services to be provided by the quantity surveyor; ensuring client awareness and acceptance of client responsibilities *vis-a-vis* the provision by the client of price-related information; and establishing the basis for remuneration. Misunderstandings and unfulfilled expectations on the part of the client are likely to result if these aspects are not comprehensively dealt with at the start of a project.

#### (a) Use of engagement documentation

Prior to addressing the specific questions in this section, respondents were questioned on their use of the standard Client - Quantity Surveyor (Private Sector) Agreement (ASAQS, 1986), and whether or not the architect receives a copy of this document. All ten quantity surveyors report that they seldom, if ever, use this document. The reasons cited for this include:

- : a dislike for standard documentation,
- : the need for simplicity,
- : the cumbersome nature of the Agreement and a preference for well-drafted letters,
- : the use of letters modelled on the Agreement, but tailored to the needs of the project, and,
- : the nature of the client. Large institutional clients favour formal contracts, whilst smaller clients often prefer the intimacy of a less formal arrangement. Large institutional clients invariably possess their own form of agreement.

Of the architects, five (50%) claim to be unaware of whether or not quantity surveyors utilise the Agreement. They do not receive a copy of the contractual agreement between the client and the quantity surveyor, and hence are unaware of what services the quantity surveyor has been formally commissioned to undertake. The remaining five architects all report the use by quantity surveyors of engagement letters (as opposed to the Agreement), of which three claim to receive a copy. One architect states that the letters are usually vague and inadequate in that they do not specify the services to be undertaken. Architects appear to rely on 'trade usage', 'experience' and 'the services a quantity surveyor *normally* provides' in utilising the services of the quantity surveyor.

Only two of the ten clients report use of the Agreement, and furthermore claim that the architect is not given a copy thereof. One of these clients states that the architect is informed orally at the briefing meeting of the scope of the quantity surveyor's commission. Of the remaining eight clients, one client relies on the letter of acceptance from the quantity surveyor to define the duties to be performed, whilst the other seven clients utilise their own forms of agreement or letters of engagement. All eight state that the architect does not receive a copy of the agreement or letter, but three report that the architect is informed orally at a briefing meeting.

The seven clients utilising their own form of engagement letter or agreement state that these documents define the scope of work to be done by the quantity surveyor, but that this is open to negotiation prior to adoption.

Opinions were expressed regarding the vague nature of some of the terminology contained in the Agreement (ASAQS, 1986). For example, the terms 'initial broad estimate', 'reasonably revising' a cost plan, and 'cost monitoring services' do not comprehensively describe the scope of those activities.

#### (b) Attitudes to engagement documentation

All respondents are unanimous in their opinion that engagement documents perform a worthwhile function. Only two respondents (both quantity surveyors) report a neutral attitude, stating that their usefulness is a function of client sophistication. When asked their opinion regarding their

perceptions of their clients' attitudes to engagement documents, three quantity surveyors (30%) consider clients to be ambivalent.

(c) Understanding of engagement documentation

When asked whether recipients of engagement documentation understand the contents of quantity surveyors' engagement letters, the quantity surveyors are unanimous in their opinion that they do so. Recipient understanding of engagement documentation was not tested in this survey. Further questions relate to steps taken by quantity surveyors to facilitate client and architect understanding of the engagement documents. Only one quantity surveyor claims to facilitate recipient understanding by orally presenting the contents of the documentation on a face-to-face basis. According to the remaining quantity surveyors, the steps they take to assist recipients understand engagement documents include:

- : complying with the general rules for enhancing the effectiveness of written communication,
- : partners checking each other's engagement letters,
- : tailor-making an engagement document to suit the client, and,
- : responding to specific queries.

Insofar as quantity surveyors satisfying themselves that recipients understand engagement documentation is concerned, six (60%) wait until a specific query is posed. Steps taken by the remaining four quantity surveyors include the holding of meetings with clients and obtaining telephonic feedback.

Nine of the ten clients (90%) report that quantity surveyors refrain from any formal steps to help them understand engagement documentation. The dissenting client claims that defining and understanding the engagement documentation is simply a normal part of the client - quantity surveyor negotiation process. One client is of the opinion that there is no need for explanation from the quantity surveyor as the client formulates the agreement. The architects are unanimous that quantity surveyors do not take active steps to help them understand the engagement documentation, many stating that they rely on 'trade custom'.

Five of the six quantity surveyors using reasonably standard language and format (pro-forma documentation) when compiling engagement documentation are of the opinion that it enhances both their ability to express their message and the recipient's ability to understand the message. Notwithstanding this, one quantity surveyor cautioned against the indiscriminate use of standard (model) documentation, expressing the need to implement changes should circumstances warrant any revisions.

The regular use of standardised documents may be indicative of a lack of appreciation of individual client's needs and abilities. Indeed, given that recipients possess different communication skills and decoding abilities it is unlikely that standardisation does aid recipient understanding. This view is supported by the five quantity surveyors who consider that the use of standardised documents reduces recipient ability to understand the message. Face-to-face discussions may prove beneficial.

(d) Symbolism in engagement documentation

One quantity surveyor (10%) is of the opinion that engagement documentation contains a symbolic message attempting to limit the quantity surveyor's responsibility and accountability. This sentiment is unanimously refuted by the architects, but is shared by four clients (40%). Indeed, one client claims that the Agreement (ASAQS, 1986) symbolises an *explicit* attempt to limit the quantity surveyor's responsibility and accountability.

The nine quantity surveyors denying the presence of such a symbolic message and being of the

opinion that engagement documentation symbolises something else to recipients, claim that recipients hold the same view of engagement documentation as themselves, namely, that its function is to:

- : define, rather than limit, the duties of the quantity surveyor, and,
- : act as a job description, thereby limiting erroneous expectations on the part of the client.

These views are shared unanimously by the architects, but are disputed by two clients (20%). The apparent discrepancy in the responses of the clients to the questions relating to symbolism in documentation is explained by the fact that two clients agree with the limitation sentiment, but also concede the task definition role played by engagement documents.

Two of the nine quantity surveyors concede that recipients may view engagement documentation as an attempt to limit responsibility and accountability.

*In summary, engagement documents are seen as performing a worthwhile function. The Agreement (ASAQS, 1986) is not in widespread use, with clients frequently utilising their own forms of agreement or engagement letter. Furthermore, architects seldom receive a copy of the engagement document, giving rise to doubts regarding their appreciation of the scope of the quantity surveyor's commission. Quantity surveyors tend to assume that recipients understand the content of engagement documentation and take few steps to assist them in understanding such documentation. Moreover, quantity surveyors fail to satisfy themselves of recipient understanding of the documents. This is seen as a barrier to effective communication. Quantity surveyors appear to be unaware of the applicable communication principles affecting message fidelity and are misguided in their beliefs regarding the benefits to be derived from the use of standardised or model engagement documentation. Face-to-face discussions would help promote effective communication.*

*Nearly half of the clients claim the presence of a symbolic message, attempting to limit the quantity surveyor's responsibility and accountability, in engagement documentation. Clearly, this is unsatisfactory from a communication point of view given the introduction of a 'noise' factor into the communication process, thereby reducing the possibility of congruent expectations and reactions between sender and receiver.*

### *The Client's Brief*

In essence, the client's brief represents the initial formulation of the 'mind model' of the project held by the client. The preparation of the outline brief (message) by the client is important because the quality of the brief impacts on the quality of the solutions proposed by the design team. More specifically, at the project inception stage it provides a mechanism for providing the quantity surveyor and architect with information necessary for the compilation of building price forecasts. Moreover, the process of compiling a rigorous outline brief assists the client in clarifying needs and objectives, priorities and commitment to the acquisition of a building.

#### (a) Use of the client's brief

Prior to dealing with the specific questions in this section, respondents were asked whether or not a written brief is normally provided by clients, and whether or not the quantity surveyor receives a copy.

Four clients (40%) report providing the architect with a formal written brief, with one of these stating that the quantity surveyor is not provided with a copy. The remaining clients (60%) utilise briefing meetings at which the quantity surveyor is said to be present. The minutes of these meetings then constitute the initial brief and provide a basis for future development. Nine clients (90%) report that the quantity surveyor is normally present at the briefing meeting.

The architects are of the unanimous opinion that very seldom do they receive a written brief from clients. Of these, four (40%) are not in favour of providing the quantity surveyor with a copy of the brief, claiming that it is sufficient to explain the sketch design to the quantity surveyor as those drawings embody the essence of the brief. Five architects report that the quantity surveyor is not normally present at briefing meetings. Three of these architects do not advocate the presence of the quantity surveyor at briefing meetings.

Only one of the quantity surveyors (10%) reports usually receiving the client's brief from either the client or the architect. The majority of quantity surveyors (90%) would like to receive a written copy of the client's brief. One quantity surveyor considers the brief of crucial importance to the architect but of little value to the quantity surveyor, claiming that the sketch designs constitute a distillation of the brief. Six quantity surveyors (60%) report attending briefing meetings.

(b) Attitudes to the client's brief (oral or written)

Specific questions sought to establish respondents' attitudes to the client's brief. Clients and architects are unanimous in their opinion that the brief performs a worthwhile function and that their attitude towards the brief is positive, assertions supported by eight and nine of the ten quantity surveyors, respectively. The dissenting quantity surveyors report an uncertain and/or neutral attitude towards the brief, stating that the client's brief is not normally passed on by the architect and that the value of the brief is a function of client sophistication. When asked their opinion regarding their perceptions of their clients' attitudes towards the brief, seven (70%) report positive attitudes, whilst three (30%) consider clients to be ambivalent.

(c) Understanding of the client's brief (oral or written)

Respondent quantity surveyors are unanimous in their opinion that clients believe them to understand the contents of the client's brief, that no ambiguity exists, and that they operate under these assumptions. Quantity surveyor understanding of the client's brief was not tested in this survey.

Clients and architects were asked specifically what steps are taken by them to facilitate quantity surveyor understanding of the brief. Fifty percent of the architects claim that the presence of the quantity surveyor at the briefing meeting is sufficient to facilitate an understanding of the brief. The remaining architects, stating that the quantity surveyor is *not normally present* at the briefing meeting, cite the following as the means used to help the quantity surveyor comprehend the brief:

- : Discuss and explain the brief to the quantity surveyor.
- : Explain the sketch drawings to the quantity surveyor. The sketch drawings represent the architect's interpretation of the brief. The essence of the brief is embodied in the drawings.

The majority of clients (90%) report that they hold briefing meetings at which the quantity surveyor is normally present. Of these, three clients claim to provide the design team with a written brief. The dissenting client issues a written brief to the architect at a briefing meeting. The quantity surveyor is normally excluded from that meeting, and is not issued with a copy of the written brief.

A further aspect examined deals with quantity surveyors' opinions regarding steps taken by clients and architects, firstly, to assist quantity surveyor understanding of the brief and, secondly, to satisfy themselves that the brief is understood by the quantity surveyor. In respect of the first issue, quantity surveyors report that they:

- : attend briefing meetings by the client (60%). *One* of these respondents reports being provided with a written brief,

- : attend consultants' meetings at which the architect explains the brief (10%), and,
- : are provided with sketch drawings embodying the essence of the brief (30%).

Insofar as the second issue is concerned, quantity surveyors are unanimous that neither the client nor the architect take steps to ensure that they understand the brief. The usual procedure is for clients and architects to react in response to specific questions from the quantity surveyor.

Two of the ten quantity surveyors state that clients use reasonably standard language and format (pro-forma documentation) when compiling the brief. Eight quantity surveyors consider that the use of pro-forma documentation enhances their ability to understand the brief, claiming that it introduces a structured approach to document compilation. Of the two remaining quantity surveyors, one is ambivalent and one is opposed to the use of standard documentation by virtue of the fact that each project is different. As all quantity surveyors possess different communication skills it is unlikely that the use of a reasonably standardised format will enhance the quantity surveyor's ability to understand the brief. Stated differently, the use of such documents symbolises the quantity surveyor's primary concern with his or her evidence-gathering objectives, while ignoring the communication aspects of the document.

#### (d) Symbolism in the client's brief

Seven quantity surveyors (70%) consider the client's brief to represent (symbolise) the distillation of the client's requirements in respect of the proposed project, sentiments shared by six architects (60%) and nine clients (90%), respectively. Upon further examination however, it is clear that little, if any, disagreement actually exists between the respondents. More specifically, respondents see the brief as a representation of the client's needs, but subject to the following qualifications:

- : The extent to which the brief represents the client's needs is a function of client sophistication.
- : Clients do not always know what they want at the initial stages of the project. The brief can thus be seen as a representation of needs at a specific point in time.
- : The brief is a 'living concept'. It is usually initially uncertain, providing a good basis for preliminary discussion and development in an evolutionary manner.
- : The brief represents a source of information and is an essential communication instrument.

*In summary, it appears that architects and quantity surveyors do not usually receive a written copy of the client's brief. Briefing meetings appear to be the usual method by which architects are made aware of the client's requirements. Quantity surveyors do not always attend briefing meetings. The fact that quantity surveyors (and architects) do not always receive a written brief from clients and that quantity surveyors are not always present at briefing meetings is clearly unsatisfactory from a communication viewpoint. Notwithstanding the apparent lack of use of a written brief on the part of clients, the majority of respondents appear to consider the brief to perform a worthwhile function, and view it in a positive fashion. Clearly, respondents recognise the importance of the brief as a means of communication.*

*It appears that, all too often, clients and architects assume quantity surveyor understanding of the brief, refrain from taking steps to assist quantity surveyors to understand the brief, and fail to satisfy themselves of quantity surveyor understanding. It would seem reasonable to conclude that, in the interests of effective communication, clients and architects should be more proactive in facilitating quantity surveyor understanding of the client's brief.*

*Notwithstanding the fact that few quantity surveyors report the use of a pro-forma brief by clients, the majority consider that their ability to understand the brief would be enhanced by receiving such documentation. The desirability of this approach from a communication viewpoint is questionable. It is clear that, whilst the client's brief is seen by the majority of respondents as a representation of the client's needs and expectations in respect of the proposed project, respondents unanimously agree that the 'brief' is an evolutionary process.*



### *Use of the Language of Building Price Forecasting*

Price planning and control is essentially a technical language and, consequently, quantity surveyors should be mindful of the fact that architects and clients may not be as well versed in matters concerning the meaning of terms relating to building prices as themselves. Consequently, in order to maximise the transference of meaning, it is incumbent upon quantity surveyors to structure their price messages in a manner commensurate with the nature of the receiver. Participants in the survey were asked to comment on the extent to which the language of building price messages (terminology such as 'preliminaries', 'escalation' and 'elemental') is similarly understood by the various parties.

Of the thirty respondents, not one is of the opinion that the language of building price messages is similarly understood by all three groups of participants. Almost all quantity surveyors and architects are in agreement that such language is similarly understood by themselves, with one quantity surveyor claiming that architects do not possess a similar understanding to that of quantity surveyors. Quantity surveyors and architects are in broad agreement that clients do not normally possess a similar understanding of the language to themselves, although they concede that the level of understanding is a function of client sophistication. For example, institutional clients invariably possess their own property development divisions, staffed by persons holding relevant professional qualifications.

Only one of the ten quantity surveyors perceives clients to possess similar understanding, a sentiment shared by three of the ten architects. Clients, on the other hand, consider their understanding of the language of building price messages to be on a par with that of architects, albeit at a slightly lower level than that of quantity surveyors.

*These responses confirm the likelihood that the language of building price messages is dissimilarly understood by at least some of the sophisticated participants in the price reporting process. This dissimilarity has the potential to affect communication effectiveness in two ways, namely:*

- (a) It is unlikely that congruency of meaning between sender and receiver will be achieved if the language is differently understood.
- (b) As language is symbolic of underlying events and activities (Young, 1986), differences in comprehending the language of building price messages may mean that the participants possess different understandings of the underlying principles and practices used to summarise the 'price' events and activities that constitute the subject of the communication.

When questioned regarding the extent to which the effectiveness of communication in the price forecasting process would be improved by changing the language, none of the thirty respondents is of the opinion that communication effectiveness would be improved if the language contained *more* technical terms. Indeed, nine respondents (30%) advocated the use of fewer technical terms, a view held by three quantity surveyors and six clients. Architects are unanimous in their satisfaction with the *status quo*. Reasons and comments given by respondents wishing fewer technical terms include:

- : making price forecasts more understandable to recipients and clarifying the definition of the terms in use,
- : minimising the use of technical 'jargon', and the confusion its usage creates. For example, confusion surrounds the use of the term 'budget',
- : breaking down barriers created by the use of technical language, and,
- : making the language more descriptive but less technical.

Twenty-one respondents (70%) favour retaining the same number of technical terms. Of these, seven are quantity surveyors, ten are architects and four are clients. The reasons cited by this group include the assertion that the terms in use are broadly understood at present and that clients

are growing in sophistication. One quantity surveyor favours standardisation within the profession of the meaning of the existing terms. Such standardisation could, however, result in barriers to communication with external groups.

Young (1986), in an evaluation of written communication in auditing, suggests general rules to enhance the effectiveness of written communication in the auditing environment. It is proposed here that these rules apply no less to the communication of information by the quantity surveyor and the rest of the design team. When questioned on quantity surveyor compliance with these rules, all but two quantity surveyors are *unanimous* in their assertion that they attempt to comply with the general rules.

*In summary, it appears that significant differences exist between the opinions of clients and their professional advisors regarding the extent to which clients similarly understand the language of building price messages, with the former claiming a greater level of understanding than that credited to them by their consultants. Moreover, quantity surveyors and architects generally favour retaining the same number of technical terms, whilst clients favour fewer. Thus, 'language differences' may act as a barrier to effective communication with clients. The majority of quantity surveyors claim to attempt to comply with the rules for enhancing the effectiveness of written communication in drafting letters and reports.*

### Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to introduce a communication-based analysis of aspects of the inception stage environment within which the communication of price-related information occurs. It has been found that, from a communication viewpoint, the message sent is not always the message received, potentially resulting in barriers to effective communication. The future development of information transfer and management systems should encompass the need to develop commensurately effective interpersonal communication systems.

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