

**Exploring internal strategic risk communication in a  
South African national government department**

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Mini-dissertation accepted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree *Master of Commerce in  
Applied Risk Management* at the North-West University

Supervisor:

Malora Keevey

## NOTES TO EXAMINERS

- The mini-dissertation should demonstrate that the student has the ability to:
  - Do research
  - Constructively criticise own and others' research
  - Report the research results clearly, accurately and concisely with enough information to allow others to evaluate, and perform a similar study, should they wish to do so.
- This study represents the student's learning during a nine-month research project at master's degree level. It is therefore not necessary that the results represent a substantial contribution to the academic knowledge of the field.
- The mini-dissertation was written in article format and consists of three sections: Research project overview, Article and Reflection. The focus of the mini-dissertation is on the article written by the student.
- The research project overview section should provide a high-level introduction to the research project that adequately prepares the reader to understand how the study fit into the Centre for Applied Risk Management (UARM)'s research projects.
- The potential journal selected by the student is intended as an academic learning experience for the student. If suitable, a reworked version of the article may be submitted to the selected journal post examination.
- The reflection section should provide a critical evaluation of the study, and also gives the student the opportunity to reflect on her/his personal learning during the project.
- The student should provide a study-specific summary of the literature related to the specific study in the article and is not expected to provide a separate chapter containing a risk culture literature review in the mini-dissertation, as this has been covered and assessed as part of the examined assignment for the Behavioural Risk Management module that forms part of this master's degree.
- The maximum word count for the article is 8000 words. This maximum word count includes words used in tables and figures, and excludes the article abstract, references and appendices. The maximum word count for the abstract is 300.
- The additional information in the appendices should be considered when evaluating the content of the three main sections of the dissertation.
- The role of the supervisors was to provide guidance and assistance on project conceptualisation, data analysis, interpretation and writing skills. The student carried the major responsibility for conceptualising, setting up, executing and writing up the research project.
- Turnitin was used to assist with plagiarism checking before the student was allowed to submit for examination.

## **PREFACE**

This mini-dissertation is the final deliverable for the Master of Commerce (MCom) in Applied Risk Management. The mini-dissertation was written in article format and consists of three sections: Research project overview; Article; and Reflection.

This mini-dissertation is the student's work. The student was responsible for the final concept, set up, execution of the research project and writing of the mini-dissertation. The members of the supervisory team contributed in an advisory and technical support capacity to the study's conception and design, analysis and interpretation of data, and critical revision of the manuscript. The mini-dissertation was language edited before submission for examination. However, the student is responsible for doing these edits, and for the grammatical correctness of the final document.

The main study supervisor gave the student permission to submit this mini-dissertation for examination.

## **ABSTRACT**

The concept of risk communication is an integral part of risk analysis and a necessary tool to facilitate consistency and appropriately define issues to improve the risk management process. Although literature on risk communication has been published, no research was found to be reported on internal strategic risk communication focusing on the perceptions of employees, specifically in a national government department in South Africa. The study reported here explored employees' lived experiences of risk communication in terms of barriers to and facilitators of internal strategic risk communication. In addition, feedback on how the process could be improved was gathered. A qualitative explorative study was conducted on the basis of semi-structured interviews. Using the convenience sampling method, 12 out of a population of 125 senior and middle managers were selected to address the research questions. Participants were asked what barriers to and facilitators of strategic risk communication prevail in the department and what they considered could be done differently. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. An inductive thematic coding process was applied to analyse the data by extracting codes and themes from the interviews. The results represented five key themes related to barriers and two about facilitators of strategic risk communication in the department. The barriers identified included a lack of collaboration with stakeholder, message not reaching the intended recipient, risk framing, poor tone at the top, and risk champions not working effectively. The facilitators included oversight structures and the work of risk practitioners. Participants also provided recommendations to improve the strategic risk communication process such as development of a communication strategy to direct communication more effectively. The research scope was limited to strategic risk communication, which excludes other forms of risks, including operational risks. Further research should be conducted to source the views of employees in the organisation at other levels and also to involve other departments that assist the department to implement mitigation plans.

**Key words:** Risk management, risk work, risk communication, strategic risk, strategic objectives, South African national government.

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## RESEARCH PROJECT OVERVIEW

The concept of risk communication is an integral part of risk analysis and a necessary tool to facilitate consistency and appropriately define issues to improve risk management process (Hardy et al., 2020, Størkersen et al.,2023). There has been an extensive debate on how to achieve its effectiveness measured by the extent to which the intended communication purpose is realised (Boholm, 2019, Kaspersen, 2014). A plethora of literature has been published providing general advice and guidance on risk communication, however, no research was found to be reported on internal strategic risk communication focusing on the perceptions of employees, specifically in a national government department in South Africa. Studies contributing to this interdisciplinary and diverse study field, should be explored to nurture this body of knowledge (Balog, 2020). This study explored employees' perceptions and lived experiences of internal strategic risk communication.

The research field sparked the interest of the author since it encompasses the entire process of risk management. I have always been interested in how could we, as risk practitioners contribute to the improvement of risk management practices in the organisations that we serve. Assessing perceptions provides insight on how risk communication is received by employees. Feedback received will be valuable to influence methodologies and ways to frame risk communication in the department.

The participants were employees in the senior and middle level management in the studied department. These management levels were selected as they are mostly responsible for the implementation of risk management processes.

The article was written in fulfilment of a mini-dissertation and will not be published for the public access, unless permission is obtained from the department after examination. The journal selected for possible publishing is the journal of risk research. The journal was selected as it publishes the theoretical and empirical research and commentaries on communication, regulation and management of risk. The journal stood out from the rest publishing risk communication research as it not dominated by health and environmental research but covers several areas of research including public policy and administration of the studied department is responsible for. The journal could be accessed through the website <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjrr20>.

Table 1: Role players in the mini-dissertation study.

#	TEAM MEMBER	ROLE
1	Researcher	Thabisile Khumalo
2	Supervisor	Malora Keevey
3	Statistician	N/A
4	Editor	Dr. Graham Baker

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# ARTICLE

## Exploring internal strategic risk communication in a South African national government department

### Abstract

The concept of risk communication is an integral part of risk analysis and a necessary tool to facilitate consistency and appropriately define issues to improve the risk management process. Although literature on risk communication has been published, no research was found to be reported on internal strategic risk communication focusing on the perceptions of employees, specifically in a national government department in South Africa. The study reported here explored employees' lived experiences of risk communication in terms of barriers to and facilitators of internal strategic risk communication. In addition, feedback on how the process could be improved was gathered. A qualitative explorative study was conducted on the basis of semi-structured interviews. Using the convenience sampling method, 12 out of a population of 125 senior and middle managers were selected to address the research questions. Participants were asked what barriers to and facilitators of strategic risk communication prevail in the department and what they considered could be done differently. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. An inductive thematic coding process was applied to analyse the data by extracting codes and themes from the interviews. The results represented five key themes related to barriers and two about facilitators of strategic risk communication in the department. The barriers identified included a lack of collaboration with stakeholders, message not reaching the intended recipient, risk framing, poor tone at the top, and risk champions not working effectively. The facilitators included oversight structures and the work of risk practitioners. Participants also provided recommendations to improve the strategic risk communication process such as development of a communication strategy to direct communication more effectively. The research scope was limited to strategic risk communication, which excludes other forms of risks, including operational risks. Further research should be conducted to source the views of employees in the organisation at other levels and also to involve other departments that assist the department to implement mitigation plans.

**Key words:** Risk management, risk work, risk communication, strategic risk, strategic objectives, South African national government.

## 1. Introduction

Government departments in South Africa have to manage strategic risks to increase the chance of achieving their strategic objectives such as enhancing governance, expanding state capacity, policy coordination, and service delivery. The department in which the study was conducted is among those at the centre of the South African government. The operating environment is political, hence strategic objectives may be subject to alteration as political administrations and policies change, introducing a new risk environment. It is therefore necessary to structure an effective process for understanding and managing those risks that may hinder the achievement of these objectives. Risk work is important in this context as it integrates human effort with the organisation's infrastructure to support risk management strategies (Hardy et al., 2020). Risk communication is part of risk work and at the heart of this study. It is defined as the interactive exchange of information and opinions among risk assessors, risk managers and other interested parties concerning risks, across all aspects of the risk management process (Demeritt & Nobert, 2014). This field of research has been selected for this study as it is viewed as a necessary tool to facilitate consistency and appropriately define issues to improve the risk management process within the organisation. The current state of risk management was perceived to be a "silo" compliance exercise, hence the recommendations by participants may assist in improving current practices.

To collect data, a qualitative explorative research method was applied. In a single department, 12 out of 125 senior and middle managers were selected using the convenience sampling method. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. An inductive thematic coding process was adopted to derive codes and themes from the interviews. The study explored employees' lived experiences of risk communication within the organisation. It was guided by the research question: what are the barriers and facilitators of risk communication in this government department?

Although the concept of risk communication has been comprehensively researched over the years, Boholm's study shines a light on the important fact that, as late as 2019, the organisational context of risk communication was still in its infancy. There has been an extensive debate and advice by researchers on what risk communication is and the effectiveness of risk communication measured by the extent to which the purpose of the intended communication is realised (Boholm, 2019; Demeritt & Nobert, 2014; Dietz, 2013; Rickard, 2021). The literature provides frameworks and handbooks on how to achieve best practice in risk communication; in addition, crucial factors to be considered for effective risk communication and factors which may lead to failure and success have been identified by various authors (Bier, 2001; Boholm, 2019; Kasperson et al., 1988; Lundgren & McMakin, 2018).

As a cross-disciplinary and diverse research field, further research needs to be performed to investigate the influence of organisational context in communicating risks (Balog-Way et al., 2020;

Chess, 2001). Although Boholm's study of 2019 was of value in reporting risk communication successes and failures, focusing on the experiences of employees, it was centred on the experiences of health and environmental practitioners who were experts in their fields directly working with risk communication. In contrast, no literature was found on employee perceptions of internal strategic risk communication in a national government department, least of all in South Africa, about which this study is the first of its kind to be reported.

## **2. Background**

The literature on risk work and risk communication was examined focusing on the themes, barriers and facilitators of risk communication.

### **2.1 Organisational context**

In the context of this study, risk communication was explored as part of risk work in relation to internal top-down and bottom-up communication of strategic risk information facilitated and distributed by a risk management unit. The process is facilitated following the National Treasury's enterprise risk management framework, which guides all government departments in South Africa with regard to risk management. The framework provides that the institution's risk communication process should disseminate relevant, timely, accurate and complete information to support enhanced decision making (Treasury, 2010). However, the corresponding document does not cover practical steps and advice on how risk communication should be conducted nor mentions what leads to success or failure of the process. The insights gained in the study reported here can therefore be used to complement and build on the available enterprise risk management document. They could also be used to facilitate further research on how risks are organised in the department and influence methodologies on ways to frame risk.

The study was conducted in one national department whose key role is to organise government by bringing an integrated approach to governance and to ensure that all such efforts are properly aligned. Participants in this study were employees responsible for content and administrative support to the executives and policy development. The focus of this study was on departmental personnel's experience of strategic risk communication processes. Although they possessed certain communication skills, they were not experts in the area of risk communication.

The author acknowledges that the reason for a government department not to function well is not limited to ineffective communication. There are other pressing issues including lack of service delivery, fraud and corruption, to mention prominent ones. However, according to Bostrom et al. (2018); Brewer (2011) and Rowan (1991), risk communication is critical as it brings awareness of risks to be managed, through information sharing, awareness programmes, educational interventions to change behaviour, and motivation to take appropriate action, thereby increasing the chance to manage them. Hardy et al. (2020) posit that risk communication is often informed by

research on risk perceptions, explaining why individuals perceive risk differently, which may not be consistent with what is communicated. This study was therefore conducted to discover how employees perceive strategic risk communication information to increase its effectiveness.

## 2.2 Risk work

Risks can be organised through risk culture, risk translation and risk work. Risk culture relates to norms, attitudes and behaviours shared among employees about risk awareness, risk taking and risk management in decision making (Walter & Narring, 2020). Risk translation refers to the process of change in the object at risk, thereby resulting in strategic or political advantage due to redistribution of responsibilities (Czarniawska, 2012; Hardy & Maguire 2020). Risk work, as the focus of this study, situates a specific type of risk talk as a legitimate cross-functional vocabulary of business (Størkersen et al., 2023). This involves using lessons learned from previous experiences to facilitate and internalise practices that provide solutions and offers modes of action (de Graaff et al., 2021; Power, 2016). The common assumption is that knowledge is gained and applied in everyday risk management practices (Brown & Gale, 2018). The concept was put into action during the recent COVID-19 pandemic when organisations used risk work to create strategies to deal with uncertainty in real time during a crisis. However, it should be noted that risk work is not only limited to a real-time mode of managing risks. This study's emphasis is on the prospective mode, which is how organisations identify future risks in order to prepare for them (de Graaff et al., 2021; Hardy et al., 2020). To ensure value, a clear process of how risk work, organisational objectives, risk management objectives and risk management structures interact should be mapped out (Figure 1).

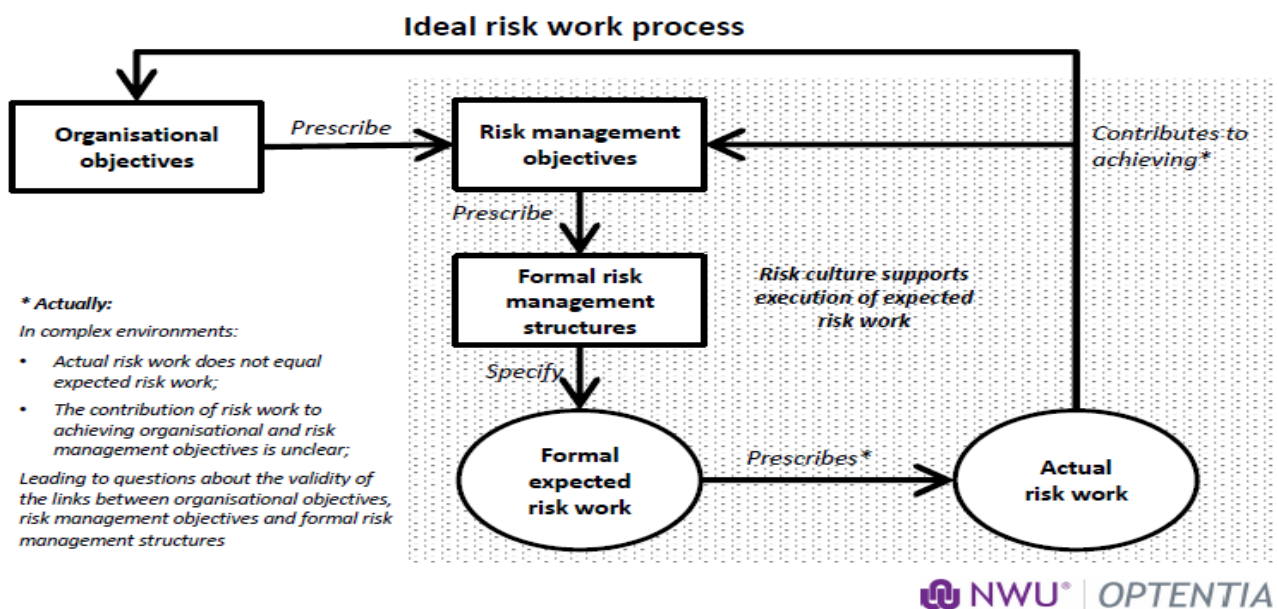


Figure 1: Risk work process flow diagram (Zaaiman H, 2022)

Entrenched in the process illustrated in Figure 1 is risk communication, which ensures that important issues are identified for analysis and facilitate stakeholder understanding (Hardy et al., 2020; Størkersen et al., 2023).

### **2.3 Risk communication**

The term “risk communication” comprises two elements, risk and communication. Aven et al. (2011) define risk as an uncertain consequence of an event which may have a negative effect on an organisation’s objectives. Hampel (2006), on the other hand, describes communication as transmission of information from the communicator to the receiver, whereby the latter not only perceives information but actively reconstructs its meaning. The main objective of risk communication is to assist affected parties to understand the rationale of risk-based decision making by providing factual evidence to help them make an informed choice in relation to the matter at hand (Renn, 2020). In this study, risk communication was limited to internal communication about strategic risk and what facilitated or created a barrier in receiving, understanding and applying the information distributed when making decisions.

### **2.4 Barriers to effective risk communication**

Various scholars have written about the challenges to risk communication. For instance, Yosie and Herbst (1998) report that people with a modest income or those not conversant enough in English may struggle to participate in risk communication processes. To avert this, some authors have indicated the importance of considering the audience one ought to communicate with, when crafting and distributing messages about risks. Another factor to consider is demographic orientation. For instance, Johnson et al. (1988) noticed differences in risk perceptions between white males and white females. Balog-Way et al. (2020) added political orientation to demographic orientations. Therefore, every risk communication exercise has to be tailor made for its intended audience.

Bier (2001) noted that a problem with communicating risk information is that it is often highly technical, complex and uncertain and mostly uses bureaucratic language. This defeats the whole purpose of the action. This may validate the point made by Kaspersen et al. (2012) that those most affected by risk may be the least likely to participate in risk communication.

Other barriers to comprehension were previously linked to a lack of familiarity with a particular concept and the lack of a mental model relevant to the subject matter (Rowan, 1991).

Hampel (2006) notes that risk experts focus on the event rather than the broader understanding of risk, which may lead to its overestimation. Hampel (2006) further acknowledges that because risk communication is an art rather than a science, its effectiveness also depends on the experience of the communicator. Renn (2020) suggests that technical experts want to communicate the extent of their expertise whereas the recipient is interested in communicating about the likely impact of exposure to the risk. Government departments in South Africa follow hierarchical structures, leading to employees not in strategic positions not involved in strategic risk communication processes.

### **2.5 Facilitators of effective risk communication**

Over the years, much literature has been produced on what facilitates effective risk communication.

Rowan (1991) made an important contribution in the field, as it introduced the framework for risk communication. Rowan's study emphasised the element of the need for risk communicators to understand the process as problem solving, as it argued that previous ways of risk communication strategies gave inadequate attention to vital communication skills.

Bier (2001) identified the principles of risk communication for lay people; its conclusion provided key steps to planning risk communication efforts as legal requirements or organisational policies, their purpose, the selection of appropriate strategy, audience characteristics and their sources of information, and designing risk communication messages. The last steps include giving consideration to comparing the same risk at different times, avoiding comparison with risks considered trivial, and piloting risk communication messaging.

Renn (2020) discussed the three levels of debates usually made by the recipients of risk information and indicated that they affect the success or failure of any risk communication effort. The debates involve the factual arguments about probabilities, exposure levels and the extent of the potential consequence should the risk materialise. The second level is the competence to deal with the risk from the risk management communicators to distribute risks and benefits. The third level is social values, cultural lifestyles and their impact on risk management. Boholm (2019) found that involving stakeholders in the process including decision making was the factor that increased the chance of success of risk communication.

Substantial efforts have been made therefore to provide practical advice on how to achieve best practices in risk communication. However, some studies indicate that the disjuncture between the theoretical framework and advice on what leads to success or failure lies in the context of how risk communication is conducted in a particular organisation (Balog-Way et al., 2020; Boholm, 2019). This understanding strengthens the importance of situating it as a mode of communication linked to participants' activities, processes, their roles and responsibilities, assumptions and knowledge influenced by their corresponding organisational structures. Hence Balog-Way et al. (2020) encourage exploration of multiple fields of research as they suggest that settling on a single generic version of what constitutes effective risk communication would be less productive. The study reported here documented facilitators and makes recommendations for improving how to facilitate effective strategic risk messages for the government department in focus

### **3. Method**

Method presents the qualitative semi-structured interview process followed to collect and analyse data.

#### **3.1 Research design**

Qualitative interviews were conducted in a single government department in South Africa. These

interviews were run in a semi-structured manner, in which a set of predetermined questions were posed (listed in Appendix A). The participants were encouraged to ask further questions from the interviewer if clarity was needed. The author asked probing questions where further information was required to gain more insight. Qualitative research methods are systematic inquiries about how people experience a certain phenomenon (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). The method was selected since the study was based on employees' experiences and perceptions. Interviews allowed the author to investigate the research question in detail and collect compelling data for analysis. In qualitative methods, study rigour is difficult to maintain because of its subjectivity. To mitigate against such a risk, the student worked closely with the study supervisors during the exercise and was trained to follow a scientific method in conducting the interviews (Ajagbe et al., 2015).

### **3.2 Target population and sample**

Exploratory field-orientated research that is not concerned with statistical generalising often uses non-probabilistic samples (Taherdoost, 2016). In this study, the author targeted management as drivers of the risk process –12 participants, six at senior and six at middle management level, were selected from a total population of 125 managers in the department using a convenience sampling method. This approach was adopted as it is simple and inexpensive, because the department's employees were readily available for interview. Though the sample size was small, it was sufficient to reach data saturation, as the research aim was to understand perceptions and experiences among a group with similar characteristics (Taherdoost, 2016).

### **3.3 Data collection and analysis**

The one-on-one interviews were conducted using the Microsoft Teams online platform. Online interviews were preferred for both the author and the participants as some of the employees were working remotely. The interviews, which lasted 30 minutes on average, were conducted during office hours with permission from the project sponsor to allow greater participation. To facilitate preparation, the interview guide (Appendix A) with questions was communicated by e-mail to the prospective participants prior to their respective session. All participants were requested to sign a consent form before participating in the interviews (see Appendix B).

The interview questions were separated into demographic items and those specific to risk communication. Demographic questions, asked to gain a better understanding of the role and the day-to-day decision-making activities of the participant, were:

1. What is the level of your current management role?
2. What is your level of education?
3. How long have you been with the department?

The questions specific to risk communication were:

1. In your opinion, what are the challenges of strategic risk communication in the department?

2. In your view, what would you say are strategic risk communication facilitators in the department?
3. In your opinion, what should be done differently to improve the effectiveness of strategic risk communication in the department?

The sessions were recorded on Microsoft Teams after consent was granted by each participant. To ensure data integrity and familiarisation, the audio-recordings were used to transcribe the interviews verbatim. The researcher reviewed and manually corrected the word version of transcripts for spelling errors. The recordings were then deleted after the information was transcribed. Master codebook contained statements from the participants extracted from interview transcripts. An inductive thematic analysis was applied, in Microsoft Excel, to extract 30 codes, which were consolidated into seven themes and 12 sub-themes (Appendix C). The approach was selected as it involves the understanding of thoughts and experiences of participants (Kobewka et al., 2023). The key themes and sub-themes are further discussed in the results section.

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

Formal permission to perform research in the organisation and under the auspices of the university was requested and granted. Approval for the research topic was also obtained from the department prior to execution of the study. Participants were also given the option to withdraw from their interview at any stage during the process, should they wish to do so.

## **4. Results and findings**

Results are presented in two categories, namely demographic information and the response results to the strategic risk communication questions.

### **4.1 Demographic results**

As depicted in Table 2 the sample of 12 participants included six middle managers, all female, and six senior managers represented by four males and two females. The split shows that the organisation is still male dominated at senior positions. The department fosters a culture of continuous development as all participants had higher education. Of the 12 participants, eight had obtained postgraduate degrees and four had an undergraduate degree or diploma. This could be as a result of the department offering bursaries for employees to further their studies. Most of the personnel have been with the organisation for a relatively long period. Six of them have been with the department for more than ten years, three have acquired between five and ten years of experience, whereas three had less than five years' experience. This could be attributed to a conducive working environment and job satisfaction.

Table 2: Summary of demographic findings.

Participant number	Participant code	Level of management role	Level of education	Experience (years)	Gender
1	P1	Middle	Honours	4	Female
2	P2	Middle	Degree	<1	Female
3	P3	Senior	Master's	11	Male
4	P4	Senior	Degree	15	Female
5	P5	Senior	Master's	23	Male
6	P6	Middle	Honours	3	Female
7	P7	Middle	Diploma	14	Female
8	P8	Senior	Master's	9	Male
9	P9	Middle	Honours	8	Female
10	P10	Senior	Honours	14	Female
11	P11	Senior	Master's	8	Male
12	P12	Middle	Degree	16	Female

#### 4.2 In your opinion, what are the barriers to strategic risk communication in the department?

The first question posed to the participants was about barriers to strategic risk communication to which five themes emerged from the responses (Table 3)

Table 3: Themes and results summary of barriers to strategic risk communication identified by the study population.

Theme	Sub-theme	Description of the code	Illustrating quotation
Message not reaching the intended recipient	Risk terminology and language.	Risk message is lost in the complexity of risk terminology and the use of English in all risk documents.	"...and also just simplifying things when it comes to risk management. Sometimes we see a risk there – for an example, security breach and, we don't know what is meant." [#P1]
	Communication channels.	The use of e-mails and internal communication (I-share) system software not effective in delivering the message.	For instance, if risk management has put communication on the internal communication channel, they would have communicated but how many people will read because that platform has a lot of other information. [#P11]
	Frequency	Risk reporting only facilitated on a quarterly basis	I don't see if the development is frequently monitored, they only come in a quarter and that is when you only look at the risk, because you need to send the quarterly report, how about in your day-to day work. [#P6]
Lack of collaboration with stakeholders	Involvement	Strategic risk communication only channelled to senior management and the other levels were not consulted to obtain their inputs to set	"... as middle management we are not part of senior management meetings, sometimes it becomes a challenge that there are risks which were identified and send to our senior managers and it only comes to us when we need to complete the risk register to provide progress on action plans." [#P2].

		strategic objectives and identifying strategic risks.	
	Interactions	Lack interactions, engagements and consultations to source inputs and provide feedback	"...for me there should be a way of the harvesting of risk information is rolled out to everyone so to speak, even if it's not done that way but the feedback should reach everyone." [#P3].
	Training and awareness	Lack of training to bring awareness of strategic risks to all levels of employees.	"I don't think people at the lower level and some at middle management are even aware of strategic risks. When you can ask middle management what is our strategic risk, and even on my side I would only be able to highlight the ones within my unit, but not for the whole department." [#P6]
Risk framing	Risk practised as a compliance "silo" exercise	Risk in the department has not matured to the level that it is embedded in the daily operations. It is still driven as a traditional compliance exercise.	"We only talk about risk and risk management whenever we are prompted by risk management committee meeting, it is not something that is factored in our day to day interaction." [#P5]
	Risk governance framing	Risk management structures and governance structures working parallel to each other	"We do have risk committee meetings that are happening on quarterly basis where feedback is provided, of which we indicated the shortcomings, like when we report to the committee and we do not get assistance such as escalation where we are stark." [#P1]
	Risk identification not performed at the strategic planning session	There is no synergy between strategic planning process and strategic risk management	"How can you set your objectives then you don't identify the risks that are going to hamper the achievement of these objectives. The ideal process is to have the facilitator at the strategic planning session to also perform strategic risk assessment, because I'm concerned that these strategic planning workshops are running but there is no risks being discussed there." [#P7]
Poor tone at the top	Cultivating risk culture and enabling environment	Top management not seen to support strategic risk communication initiatives and instilling risk culture	"The very fact that we do not have members of top management in the Risk Management Committee is a problem, everything is delegated to other people. When it comes to top management participating and driving the issues of risk that is the side that is still very weak in the department." [#P5]
	Risk management unit	lack of capacity in risk management unit and the unit not strategically placed to facilitate communication	"Is risk management unit strategical located where it is and if it is, is it capacitated? So if we are of the view that it is a strategic function we should also see that in terms of funding, how you fund the structure and the activities and the platforms that are provided for communication for this risk." [#P3]
Risk champions not working effectively	Risk champions not working effectively	Inadequate implementation of the concept of risk champions	"The main thing is that we have been trying to implement the concept of risk champions for many years, to date we haven't been successful. Our intention is for risk champions to actual be the connection between risk management and specific risk owners, but I don't think the selection of these risk champions is getting the necessary attention." [#P4]

#### 4.2.1 Message not reaching the intended recipients

Members of the study population were of the view that the risk message is at the centre of barriers to strategic risk communication. For instance, #P1 indicated that the message sometimes gets lost in the risk terminology, resulting in people becoming defensive because they do not understand what is required. The sub-theme was comprehensively covered as 10 of 12 twelve participants linked barriers to risk terminology. The challenge to understanding the strategic risk communication message could not be traced to experience, level of education or the level of the role of the participant as both middle and senior managers expressed strong views about the complexity of risk jargon. Two participants who did not refer to the message as a barrier were senior managers, which shows that there is some level of understanding at a senior level. However, it was interesting to see that four of the six senior managers also found the risk message to be a challenge. This could be the evidence that the department's risk maturity level is still relatively low, hence it is still difficult to understand risk terminology and processes.

The results confirmed what has been disclosed in the literature. Nielson et al. (2005) point out that the language of experts is what creates the gap in understanding between the sender and the recipient of the risk message.

Another factor indicated as a barrier is the language used. In this case, interviewee #P9 aligns with one quote from former President Nelson Mandela, which says: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart" (Mandela, 2015). The participant's view was that the risk message should be translated into employees' home language for better understanding. This proposal may be difficult to implement in South Africa, which has 12 official languages. This is an especially daunting task as the department studied is in Gauteng province, where all official languages are spoken. However, in recognition of this constraint the audience profiling to identify affected employees can be performed and devise a workable solution such as appointing of employee representatives to ensure that information reaches the intended recipient (Yosie and Herbst, 1988). The findings were consistent with the literature as indicated by Yosie and Herbst (1998), that the use of the English language can create a barrier to conveying risk information. It was also noticed that all three participants who referred to the use of English as a barrier were females, which confirms the observation made by Johnson et al. (1988) about different perceptions between males and females.

The channels used to communicate were identified by participants as a challenge because risk information was not widely available on the platforms that are user friendly, such as smart screens available in the building, and pamphlets in strategic areas like boardrooms. Of the 12 participants, five considered that the current platforms used to communicate – e-mails and internal digital

communication (I-notice) system software – were not appropriate for the purpose. This is because strategic risk information gets overshadowed by other information on the platform while, on the other hand, e-mails do not reach the employees without laptops.

#P12 averred that the challenge of risk communication in the department is not limited to strategic risk but prevalent in all forms of risk information. This person indicated that there is no mechanism to ensure that risk communication reaches all employees in the department because there is no clear strategy on how risk communication is facilitated; who is responsible, how they receive feedback, the fact that reporting happened on a quarterly basis and that profiling staff has not been done were viewed to have a negative impact by nine participants. For them, strategic risk communication should be a continuous conversation not limited to quarterly reporting. The sub-theme was aligned to steps of planning risk communication efforts, which included selection of appropriate strategies, audience characteristics and their source of information (Bier, 2001).

#### **4.2.2. Lack of collaboration with Stakeholders**

A common experience shared by the study population was that strategic risk communication was channelled only to senior management and the other levels were not involved. As expressed by #P2, “a major problem with risk communication was not involving all levels in the process but they also need to contribute.”

Participants indicated that there is lack of ongoing engagements, training and awareness, inclusivity in a way that all levels in the department are able to contribute towards the achievement of strategic objectives. Frequent updates on the strategic risks and clear roles and responsibilities; including clear processes to involve external stakeholders where necessary were highlighted by participants as key to facilitating strategic risk communication and its absence renders communication a barrier. The findings reflect sentiments from the literature, which reports that communicating risk information requires activation of all internal corporate actors and involvement of key external stakeholders for collaboration (Boholm, 2019).

Stakeholder involvement emerged as a mutual challenge by both middle and senior managers. While middle managers felt that they were denied access to strategic risk information, senior managers considered that lack of involvement of personnel at lower levels was a self-sabotage because they are at the coal face of operations where risks materialise.

The hierarchical structures of government was indicated as one of the root causes for strategic risk information not to reach all levels of employees. Strategic issues are limited to a certain level and

that prevents strategic risks from flowing throughout the department. There is currently no process for including other levels in the department to understand strategic objectives and strategic risks.

As expressed by #P9,

“I think you know in government, we have management levels and when we talk about strategic issues, even the strategic objectives or outcomes of the department we are pitching it at the level of senior management.”

Cross (2008) confirms the results as he indicated that collaborations that are facilitated through formal structures only may become unproductive. Cross encourages de-layered organisations where employees can collaborate through informal networks, to promote flexible, innovative and efficient working environment.

### **4.2.3 Risk framing**

Eleven participants shared the view that the concept of risk in the department has not reached the state of maturity where it is embedded in the employees' daily activities and drives decision making. Risk communication was impacted by the consequences of risk practices treated as a compliance tick-box exercise. Those who are communicating do so only when they are prompted to send quarterly reports to the risk management committee.

“I think risk has been driven in a very compliance way since I joined the department. If, for instance, you have a risk on the strategic risk register, then you only start thinking about it when you get that request from risk management that, please submit your mitigation plans. It's an event here.” [#P10]

Though this was not thematic, it is worth mentioning that one participant #P1 raised the issue of trust as the contributing factor to communicating risk information for compliance purposes.

“... because every time we receive communication from risk management we receive it with fear and wonder what is it that we have done, so may respond just for compliance.” [#P1].

This could be linked to staff not being able to separate between different functions performed by the risk management unit, hence they are not sure how the information requested would be used. This participant could be the only one who was honest in identifying trust as the barrier as it has been pointed out by several authors as a key requirement for handling uncertainty of risk communication (Boholm, 2019; Brown & Gale, 2018; de Graaff et al., 2021; Størkersen et al., 2023) .

Results further show that malicious compliance – such as providing irrelevant or inaccurate information – when communicating strategic risks happened at both middle and even at senior management level irrespective of gender and education level. The one participant (#P7) who did not mention malicious compliance was the least educated and at middle management level, which may mean that understanding how to communicate strategic risks has nothing to do with how educated you are and your gender. This finding is in contrast to Yosi and Herbst (1998), who are of the view that these elements may influence comprehension of risk information.

Enterprise risk management and governance structures are not set up in a way that facilitates risk governance, hence there is communication breakdown in terms of facilitating feedback and sourcing interventions where there are blockages in implementing strategic risk mitigation plans. Eight participants felt that strategic risk information reported to risk management structures did not filter through to top management leading to solutions where top management intervention is required. According to #P2, there is no linkage in terms of risk reporting and problem solving.

Five participants commented about the planning process facilitated by the strategy directorate that does not take strategic risk management into account. Strategic risks were not discussed during strategic planning sessions, which creates a disjuncture between strategic priorities and risks.

#P4 said,

“The other thing is the timelines that we are doing the risk assessments. We have the strategic planning workshops where top management seat to develop a strategic plan and the annual performance plan (APP) but there is always a challenge that there is no sufficient time to simultaneously look at the risks while making the final decision on what should be on the strategic plan and the APP.”

The practice of separating strategic planning and strategic risk identification unfortunately kept risk information away from top management, which results in them not being able to integrate the risks in future decision making (Stein et al., 2019). This conclusion was identified by five participants, of whom four are at senior management level and was to be expected as strategic planning and risk identification are facilitated at that level.

#### **4.2.4 Poor tone at the top**

Some of the participants observed that top management were not playing their role in terms of setting the tone, in leading strategic risk communication. This barrier was identified by six of the 12 participants. There is no visibility in supporting strategic risk communication efforts. The function

has been delegated to the risk management unit to champion without adequate leadership involvement.

“The very fact that we do not have members of top management in the risk management committee is a problem; everything is delegated to other people. That’s why there is no ownership of risk management by top management of the organisation. When it comes to top management participating and driving the issue of risk that is the side that is still very weak in the organisation.” [#P5]

Delegating the risk management unit to monitoring and mitigating risks might endanger business model safeguarding by top management – “out of sight, out of mind” (Ojiako, 2012). This was worsened by the fact that although risk management were entrusted with facilitating risk practices, they were not well resourced. Five participants referred to this challenge.

“Is the risk management unit strategically located where it is and, if it is, is it capacitated? So if we are of the view that it is a strategic function, we should also see that in terms of funding, how you fund the structure and the activities and the platforms that are provided for communication for this risk, what platforms are being utilised?” [#P3]

Allocation of appropriate and adequate resources to the risk management programme demonstrates commitment by top management to effective risk management practices (Kabuye et.al, 2019). The other point made by participants was that the risk management unit is not strategically placed to effectively facilitate strategic risk communication in that the Chief Risk Officer (CRO) was not reporting directly to the accounting officer. Further to that, the level of the CRO was said to be too low to be able to influence top management.

“The appointment level of the CRO in my personal view is too low, because this person is on a Director level but has to report and get feedback from people who are at top management as high as the Deputy Director General level, and even the Director General so for them to influence then at a Director level is difficult.”[#P7]

#### **4.2.5 Risk champions not working effectively**

The department’s concept of risk champions is not working the way that it was intended to. Some of the participants were of the view that the role is not given the attention it deserves as managers were not appointing the right people in the role, and even the ones who have been appointed are not supported in fulfilling their responsibilities.

By way of an example, #P4 stated that:

“The main thing is that we have been trying to implement the concept of risk champions for many years, to date we haven’t been successful. Our intention is for risk champions to actual be the connection between risk management and specific risk owners, but I don’t think the selection of these risk champions is getting the necessary attention.”

One participant, who is a coordinator and thus a risk champion in her branch, even suggested that the role needs to be abolished as she was of the view that it makes the senior managers not to take responsibility for strategic risk information:

“...this role of a branch coordinator has messed up a lot of things, as this challenge is not only for risk management but it also affects other aspects of work. I think senior management depend a lot on the branch coordinators.” [#P12]

The sentiment was shared by five other participants, of whom four are at middle management level. This was to be expected as most of the champions are appointed at this level by the department. Though the appointment of champions at a senior management level, as recommended by participant #P7, would increase the level of proficiency in communication but worsen the inclusivity of other level of employees because managers will have no obligation to communicate with levels lower as all strategic risk communication activities would be performed by senior management.

#### 4.3 In your view, what would you say are strategic risk communication facilitators in the department?

This is the second question posed to participants to which two themes about oversight structures and risk practitioners’ work emerged.

Table 4: Summary of themes and results of facilitators of internal strategic risk communication identified by participants

Theme	Description of the code	Quote from findings
Oversight structures	The risk management committee and audit committee provide oversight and report on strategic risk information	“There is risk committee which is chaired by the external member so its helps because his reports goes to the top management or the Audit Committee.”[#P8]
Risk practitioners’ work	Risk management directorate efforts in coordinating and distributing strategic risk information including policy framework and other risk documents	“The Department is doing well in terms of making risk management visible. I believe that in terms of communication and facilitation of this programme it is done well.”[#P1]

Results revealed only two themes in terms of what participants perceive to facilitate strategic risk communication (Table 4). The fact that the department has a risk management directorate was deemed useful to drive the process, supported by oversight structures such as the risk management committee and audit committee. The policy framework and other risk management documents including the strategic risk register were said to be the source of valuable strategic risk information.

### **4.3.1 Oversight structures**

Nine participants mentioned oversight structures as assisting the process. According to #P8, these structures work well because they are independent, hence they can be objective. #P8 declared:

“There is a risk committee, which is chaired by the external member, so it helps because his reports go to the top management or the audit committee; then at least there is communication that goes to top management, even if it’s once every six months, but at least they will be forced to do something.”

#P2 thought having risk committee members who are experts in the field is the success factor for strategic risk communication.

“The risk committee plays a vital role in strategic risk communication as we do have people with knowledge and are experts in risk management, so having a risk committee and audit committee helps.”

### **4.3.2 Risk practitioners’ work**

The risk management unit was cited by seven participants as promoting strategic risks. #P12 mentioned that the fact that the department has a risk management directorate to coordinate and distribute strategic risk information was working well because there is consistency in strategic risk reporting. What makes this work is that the organisation has a process to follow in identifying, reporting and monitoring the strategic risks. Monitoring is done on a quarterly basis.

“I would say the consistency from risk management office, they are consistent at a specific time you receive communication trying to push this risk management work, so consistency from risk management office works well”. #P12

#P1 noted that the visibility of the directorate greatly assists in communicating strategic risk information.

“The department is doing well in terms of making risk management visibility. I believe that, in terms of communication and facilitation of this programme, it is done well.” [#P1]

#P11 believed that the risk workshops that are conducted by the risk management unit make a difference in communicating strategic risk. “You know, because we talking about strategic risk here, it is the responsibility of managers to identify the risk but risk management would assist and even assist with how we can mitigate by asking those relevant questions.” [#P11]

The may indicate heavy reliance on the risk management unit by line management. Nottingham (2014) states that management is responsible for developing, executing and managing enterprise risk management processes.

The last point about strategic risk communication facilitators was noted to be policy frameworks and risk documents. [#P3]

“You do have a risk register, even the strategic risk register. The policy framework is in place. The policies are comprehensively cover the work of risk management, from governance documents perspective it’s good.”[#P10]

The theme was referred to by three participants. This shows that the organisation lacks the culture of reading policy documents, which may be representative of the poor risk maturity and risk culture prevailing. We did not review any literature confirming this theme.

No participants mentioned risk appetite and tolerance statements. This was interesting as the theme is widely discussed in the literature as the critical facilitator of risk communication. This could be attributed to poor risk maturity in the department and not reading risk policies. Nottingham (2014) states that risk appetite statements facilitate effective risk communication and streamlines risk reporting formats.

#### 4.4 In your opinion, what should be done differently to improve the effectiveness of strategic risk communication in the department?

Participants also took the opportunity to provide recommendations on what could be done to improve strategic risk communication in the department.

Table 5: Recommendations provided by participants to improve the effectiveness of strategic risk communication in the department.

Risk communication message	Stakeholder involvement	Risk framing	Tone at the top	Risk communication structures
Develop a strategic risk communication strategy to give guidance in terms of the communication tools to be used, audience profiling and channels of communication. [P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P8, P9, P11, P12]	Facilitate ongoing engagements where feedback on strategic risk information can be obtained. [P1, P2, P3, P6, P8, P9, P10]  Facilitate training and awareness workshops [P1, P2, P3, P6, P8, P10]	Review the risk governance approach to find the synergy between the two pillars of risk management and governance. [P5, P9, P10]	Top management should be seen to facilitate risk information by supporting risk work, open and transparent reporting, and hold risk	Elevate the risk management office to a strategic position to be able to facilitate strategic risk communication effectively and efficiently by reviewing the structure and provide capacity. [P3, P7, P10]

Some of the examples used were the strategic risk dashboard, pamphlets in boardrooms, and strategic areas around the building, daily pop-up messages on computers and procurement of risk communication software; strategic risks should be broadcast on the smart screens located around the building on a rotational basis to avoid information overload, and also in the internal magazine. [P3, P8]	Reporting templates should be reviewed to include risk management to drive risk-based decision making. [P10]	owners accountable for risks in their areas. [P3,P5]	Review the appointment level of the chief risk officer. [P7]
	Organise risk dialogues linked to strategic risks in the risk register. [P1, P8]	Cultivate a risk management culture. [P1, P3, P6, P10, P11, P12]	Change the reporting lines to be direct to the accounting officer. [P3, P7]
	Create a platform to engage other departments where mitigations are outside the department. [P1, P7]		Review the working arrangements of the risk champions (i.e. appointments to be at least at a senior manager level. [P4, P7, P12]
			Combine strategic planning with strategic risk assessments. P4, P5, P7, P9, P10]
			Create risk sub-committees in branches.[P8]

Participants provided 15 recommendations (Table 5) to improve the effectiveness of strategic risk communication in the department. The recommendations are valid, practical and provide useful information to supplement the existing risk communication methodologies. Further to that, having identified strategic risk communication barriers, the recommendations provide a starting point for management to improve the effectiveness of risk communication in the department.

The risk communication strategy is essential as it provides a plan of how to communicate with the employees. It will delineate to whom, why, when and how the strategic risk information is facilitated. The strategy will also respond to all recommendations related to involvement of stakeholders. Risk communication strategy is among the steps identified by Bier (2001) in planning risk communication information.

Development of a risk governance approach will guide the risk communication process ensuring that information flows from top-down and bottom-up. The recommendation is encouraged by Stein (2019) as they indicate that risk governance approach ensures that top management gain control over strategic risk by staying abreast of the risk landscape thus facilitating risk based decision making (Stein et al., 2019).

Top management sets the tone of the department. If they are seen to promote the culture of risk management, that could influence all employees to follow suit. Implementing this recommendation could assist the risk management unit in their effort to facilitate strategic risk communication. Literature about the subject matter indicate that the tone at the top is significant to enhance the effectiveness of risk management practices (Kabuye et al., 2019). Capacitating risk management structures is part of top management demonstrating commitment to risk management practices.

Thus top management implementation of the recommendation would be an indication of their commitment to improving the effectiveness of risk communication and risk management practices in its entirety. To provide feedback to management, these recommendations will be presented at the risk management committee, which will incorporate them in the Chairperson's report to the accounting officer.

## **5. Conclusion**

This interview-based qualitative study, conducted in a national government department in South Africa with 12 senior and middle managers, explored employees' lived experiences of internal strategic risk communication. The study was conducted to respond to the question: what are the internal strategic risk communication barriers, and facilitators in the department. The research area has not been explored in the department, thus the findings are expected to spark interest from management. As a diverse research field, the existing literature on recommendations and guidelines on how to facilitate effective risk communication is not enough. More studies in different organisational contexts should be conducted to build an understanding of how best practice and advice can be incorporated in different organisational settings. Though findings indicated some positive themes relating to risk management practitioners' work and oversight structures assisting in facilitating strategic risk communication, by and large the participants interviewed for the study experienced barriers to how internal strategic risk communication is facilitated in the department. This could be due to the risk management unit not being well resourced and top management not creating an enabling environment for risk management practices. The themes about barriers were the complexity of the risk message and language, lack of stakeholder involvement, risk framing, poor tone at the top, and risk champions not working effectively. The study results confirmed what was found in literature, though there were minor differences. The differences related to theme about lack of trust which was thoroughly covered by literature but was referred to by one participant during the study and the theme about risk appetite and tolerance levels which was found in literature but the participant did not reference it. Risk management policy frameworks was the only theme identified by participants and we could not find any literature related to it.

The study provides useful information to guide the review of risk communication methods and could be used to complement the National Treasury's framework on enterprise risk management. The study objectives were achieved. The results answered the research questions and recommendations were also acquired. However, due to the study population's small size, the results could not be generalised. Further research could involve employees at other levels that were not consulted in the department and external stakeholders.

Conducting the study, the author appreciated the importance of risk communication as its perception can determine the attitude towards risk-based decision making.

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## REFLECTION

I have always been inquisitive about the reasons why risk management in most government institutions appear not to inform decision making. I have also thought about how risk management practitioners could influence improvement in this area. Hence, I thought about researching about risk work, but since this is a broad topic, I had to choose one focus area and risk communication made perfect sense to me as it cuts across the process of risk management. Due to time constraints in writing the mini-dissertation I had to also limit the topic to internal strategic risk communication. The topic gave me a chance to hear from the staff what are the barriers and facilitators of strategic risk communication in the department and how it can be improved. The focus was to explore employees' lived experiences and perceptions about strategic risk communication.

I enjoyed the journey especially the part about interviewing the participants who were my colleagues. I liked the energy they gave when providing responses, especially about the barriers. It sounded like everyone wanted to get to the bottom of the problem and provide solutions. However there were challenges on the way. The first challenge was the actual preparation of the mini-dissertation. I learned a lot about academic writing including the fact that it is a reiterative process. Though this challenged me a lot but at the end I realised it was a necessary inconvenience to improve my writing skills.

The other challenge was finding a work-study-life balance. In most cases I found myself behind and having to put long hours to finalise my work. In my next research project I will plan better to meet all deadlines without straining myself. Most importantly it was a rewarding journey that I have no doubt it has shaped my academic future.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### MCom Applied Risk Management UARM873 Mini-dissertation study Interview Guide

**Study title:** Exploring internal strategic risk communication in a South African national government department

**Student** (also called 'the researcher' in this form): Thabisile Khumalo

**Study supervisor:** Malora Keevey

**Supervisor contact details:** 079 888 8220, malora@keevey.co

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#### Document aim

The aim of this document is to provide a guide to the student on how s/he will be conducting the interview after obtaining informed consent from the interviewee (see MARM Interview Informed Consent Form for this study for information provided to the interviewee before the interview).

#### Interview process

##### 1. Clarification of understanding of informed consent form at start of the interview process:

Thanks for agreeing to participate in this study. I appreciate your willingness to assist me with this research.

Do you have any further questions or concerns on the informed consent form that you would like to discuss before we start the interview?

- If the interviewee has questions/concerns, discuss the questions before continuing with the interview. Remind the interviewee that s/he is allowed to leave the interview at any time during the interview.
- If the interviewee does not have questions or concerns, continue with the interview.

##### 2. Interview:

- Pose the interview questions in the pre-defined sequence:
- Facilitate the interviewee responses only when required by asking non-leading further questions:
  - Do not overdo probing questions to avoid influencing the interviewee responses.
  - Do not lead your respondent into providing information that you expect to be the answer to your research questions.
- Pre-prepare non-leading probing questions for your interview. Example questions:
  - *When you say ....., what do you mean by that?*
  - *Tell me more about.... (referring to something the respondent said, not what you wanted him/her to say)*

- *Please give me an example (concrete examples provide more information about the actual situation than general statements about a situation)*
- *What does this look like in practice?*
- *How does this happen? (note: ask 'how' rather than 'why' questions – see Harvard interview strategies document available on link listed at the end of the document)*
- *How is this important to you?*
- *How is this important to the organisation?*
- *How is this important in the context of risk management (or insert a phrase related to your specific research objective) in the organisation?*
- *If the person refers to how somebody else or a group feels about something, ask: How do you feel about this?*
- *How does this information relate to the topic under discussion? (steer respondent back to topic when s/he digresses from the topic)*

### **3. Interpersonal aspects of interviews to keep in mind**

Your behaviour during the interview will influence the interviewee's responses.

- **Do:**

- Keep the possible biases and limitations of interviews in mind when designing, executing and writing up your interviews – interview transcriptions will assist you and others to evaluate how your own expectations and natural biases may have influenced the interview data.
- Understand the aims of your interview questions in the context of your research project.
- Ask simple questions that will provide information related to your research objectives.
- Pilot and practice your interview before formal data gathering so that you can see what works and what doesn't work.
- Ask only one question at a time.
- Give the person time to think about the question – stay quiet during that time.
- Listen attentively to the interviewee.
- Ask clarifying questions where necessary for purposes of your research.
- Remain ethically sensitive as described in the informed letter of consent – do not change the rules of engagement during the interview.
- Stay warm and empathetic (not sympathetic – see under 'Don't' below) during the interview – you do not have to suddenly become a 'cold fish' during the interview.
- Relax and enjoy the interview.
- At the end of the interview, state why you are grateful to the participant for her/his time and inputs to allow the respondent to feel appreciated for their efforts to contribute to your research question.

- **Don't:**

- Interrupt your interviewee.
- Convey any approval, sympathy, or disagreement, with your interviewee's comments through words or actions (e.g. avoid encouraging nods, frowns, verbal affirmations or disagreements) – the interview is about what the person thinks, and not about how you feel about what they think.

- Answer the question for the interviewee.
- Don't ask questions that can be answered with one word, such as 'yes' or 'no'.
- **What if the interviewee becomes frustrated or emotional during the interview?**
  - Stay calm.
  - Do not interrupt, try to defend, comfort the interviewee, or 'fix' the situation – say as little as possible and allow the person to calm down.
  - Turn the audio-recording off if the person requests this.
  - When the person has calmed down, ask a question that acknowledges the emotion, such as *What about the situation prompted these strong emotions?*

#### **4. Feedback to participants**

In conclusion to the interview:

- Thank participants for their time and goodwill
- Ask them if they have any questions
- Ask participants if they would prefer to see the transcripts of the interviews prior to its use as part of the dissertation
- Ask participants if they want to receive feedback on the outcome of the research project
- Keep promises and provide participants with the requested information.

#### **5. Further preparation for the interviews**

Use other useful interview advice available online to prepare yourself for the interviews, e.g.:

<https://msu.edu/user/mkennedy/digitaladvisor/Research/interviewing.htm>

[https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/files/sociology/files/interview\\_strategies.pdf](https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/files/sociology/files/interview_strategies.pdf)

## Appendix B

# MCom Applied Risk Management UARM873 Mini-dissertation study Interview Informed Consent Form

**Study title:** Exploring internal strategic risk communication in a South African national government department

**Student** (also called 'the researcher' in this form): Thabisile Khumalo

**Study supervisor:** Malora Keevey

**Supervisor contact details:** 079 888 8220, malora@keevey.co

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### Document aim

The aim of this document is to provide potential interview study participants the opportunity to give formal informed consent to participate in this study.

### Why this interview?

This is an academic study at master's degree level, which provides the student the opportunity to learn how to do an interview-based study, while obtaining data expected to be useful for your organisation.

### Informed consent process

The interviewer will obtain written consent from participants before setting up the interviews. Written consent is given by completing and signing this form.

### Permission to do this study

The department has provided formal permission for this study to be conducted.

This study has been approved by the North-West University Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC.)

### Study aim

The proposed study aim is to explore department employees' experience of risk communication.

### Why have you been invited to take part?

Participants who are key members of the department have been selected to participate in the study. The target population of my study will be a mix of senior and middle managers. The intended sample size to reach data saturation is 12 interviews, since this is an interview-based study. The reason for the intended population is that, it will satisfy the requirements of the research to explore internal risk communication experiences of employees across the organisation.

### Interview process – what to expect from the interview

The scheduled interview will last 30 minutes. I may request more information from you post interview if necessary for clarifying study data. However, I shall endeavour to keep post-interview follow-up questions to a minimum.

The interviews will be run in a semi-structured manner, meaning that I shall ask a set of open-ended questions and may ask additional questions to clarify my understanding of your response.

Before commencing with any questions, I would like to take a minute to explain the different concepts:

- The Public Sector Risk Management Framework describes **risk** as an unwanted outcome, actual or potential, to the Institution's service delivery and other performance objectives, caused by the presence of risk factor(s). Some risk factor(s) also present upside potential, which Management must be aware of and be prepared to exploit.
- **Risk Management:** According to (Hubbard, 2020) is the identification, evaluation and prioritisation of risks. This is then achieved through coordination and application of resources to manage, monitor and influence the impact of uncertain events to maximise the realisation of opportunities.
- Hardy et al. (2020) describes **risk work** as a human effort alongside infrastructure to support risk management strategies.
- **Risk communication** as described by Hampel (2006) is the interactive exchange of information and opinions among risk assessors, risk managers and other interested parties concerning risks; across all aspects of the risk a management process.

To enable you to prepare for the discussion, I have added a list of questions I will be asking during the session, this should make for a valuable conversation, and reduce the time taken during and after the interview to clarify.

Firstly, I will just ask a couple of questions to get a better understanding of your role and your day-to-day decision-making activities.

1. What is the level of your current management role?
2. What is your level of Education?
3. How long have you been with the department?

Secondly, I would like to get your opinion/feedback on the following questions:

4. In your opinion, what are the barriers of strategic risk communication in the department?
5. In your view, what would you say are strategic risk communication facilitators in the department?
6. In your opinion, what should be done differently to improve the effectiveness of strategic risk communication in the department?

I need to audio-tape your interview to allow me to transcribe and analyse your responses post-interview. This will allow me to give full attention to your responses during the interview and not get side-tracked by multiple note-taking. I therefore kindly request that you consent to such audio-taping based on the requirement that the recordings be deleted after transcribing (see Study data management).

### **Study data management**

The audio-recordings will be deleted after the information has been transcribed by the researcher or transcriber. If a separate (i.e. not the study researcher) transcriber is used, s/he will sign a confidentiality clause before transcribing (i.e. the transcriber may not talk to anybody about the study data). Neither the company, nor the interviewee will be identified in the study transcriptions. The transcriptions constitute the raw data for this study, which will be stored safely by the researcher for three years. The interview content will be analysed and reported on anonymously. Responsible members of the North-West University may be given access to the anonymised data for supervision and/or audit of the research.

The researcher may wish to directly quote some of your responses in the study report, without identifying you. You will be asked to give permission for each such quote to be used.

### **Publication of the study results**

The study will be written up as a confidential study report in the researcher's mini-dissertation. The report will be made available to the organisation in which the study was done. Post examination, the study may be published as an academic article if formal permission to do so has been received by the organisation.

### **Potential risks to you and the organisation in taking part in this study**

Firstly, the interview will take up some of the participant's valuable time, as it will be performed during the working hours. This could extend to potential follow-on questions to seek clarity. The researcher will attempt to keep these succinct and to a minimum. The researcher will also provide the list of questions to participants prior to interviews, to allow for preparations. Interviews will be scheduled for 30 minutes, to allow for any follow-on questions and get clarity where required. A potential risk inherent to such interviews, is that your identity might be divulged. This study however allows full confidentiality. To ensure confidentiality any information you provide will be removed from the insights gathered from your answers. You may also be weary of painting the organisation in a negative light. The researcher will make all efforts to keep both individual and organisation information confidential. The name of your organisation will not be mentioned in the study report, only the industry in which it operates could be divulged. Further to this all information shared will be removed from the data obtained during the interview. Lastly, as mentioned above, all recordings will be disposed of, and transcripts will only be shared with the lecturer reviewing the assignment. Should you have any other concerns about taking part in this study, please contact the researcher or module leader to discuss your concerns.

Should you have any other concerns about taking part in this study, please contact the researcher or study supervisor to discuss your concerns.

### Potential benefits to you in taking part in this study

By participating in this study, you are contributing to a knowledge base that is currently limited. You can share your personal experiences in a completely anonymous way, allowing you the freedom to share whatever detail you deem appropriate. Participating in the study allows you to reflect more deeply than you would have otherwise, on decisions made thus far.

### Should you have concerns on this study

The interviewer has been trained to do the interview in an ethical and academically sound manner. Should you have any concerns about the interview that cannot be allayed by the researcher, either before or after the interview, you are welcome to contact the student's supervisor (contact details above) to discuss these concerns. Should you wish to further escalate your concerns, please contact the module leader, Prof Hermien Zaaiman at [hermien.zaaiman@nwu.ac.za](mailto:hermien.zaaiman@nwu.ac.za) (082 921 0463).

### Informed consent

	yes/no
I have read and understood this consent form.	
I have had a chance to ask the researcher questions on the study.	
These questions have been adequately answered for me to be able to provide informed consent to participate in this study.	
I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary.	
I have not been pressurised to take part in this study.	
I understand that I may exit the study at any time without being penalised or prejudiced against in any way.	
I hereby provide consent to contribute to this study under the conditions explained in this form.	

Initial each page and sign

Participant Signature:

Date:

Researcher Signature:

Date:

## Appendix C

### Coding results from the interviews

Participants Code	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12
<b>Level of management role</b>	Middle	Middle	Senior	Senior	Senior	Middle	Middle	Senior	Middle	Senior	Senior	Middle
<b>Level of education</b>	Honours	Degree	Master's	Degree	Master's	Honours	Degree	Master's	Honours	Honours	Master's	Degree
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male	Female	Female	Male	Female

In your opinion, what are the barriers to strategic risk communication in the department?													
Themes	Sub-theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12
Message not reaching the intended recipient	Risk terminology and language	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
	Communication channels.			✓	✓				✓	✓			✓
	Frequency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
Lack of collaboration with stakeholders	Involvement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Interactions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Training and awareness	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Risk framing	Risk practised as a compliance "silo" exercise	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Risk governance framing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	
	Risk identification not performed at the strategic planning session				✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		
Poor tone at the top	Cultivating risk culture and enabling environment			✓	✓	✓			✓			✓	✓
	Lack of capacity within Risk management unit			✓	✓			✓				✓	✓

Risk champions not working effectively	Risk champions not working effectively	✓			✓			✓	✓				✓
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**In your view, what would you say are strategic risk communication facilitators in the department?**

Oversight structures		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Risk practitioners' work		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓			✓	✓