
Utilization, accessibility, and availability of circulars at the office of the Provincial Directorate of Health Services, Western Province

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ABSTRACT

Information-seeking behavior and information utilization are two vital concepts that can be assessed to measure the usage of circulars and guidelines in organizations. Information accessibility and availability are two main components of information utilization. This descriptive cross-sectional study assesses the utilization, accessibility, and availability of circulars among senior and middle-level managers of the PDHS office in Western Province. Senior and middle-level managers constituted the study population. Quantitative method was utilized in achieving the objectives. Respondents were assessed through pre-validated questionnaires on the variables of information utilization and case scenario-based model. Accordingly, it was identified that the awareness and capability of information utilization in their daily routines were high among senior and middle-level managers (over 3). The overall performance in the case scenarios was very low (average of 22). Although the most preferred mode of keeping information was the circular file, the majority were in the belief that an alternative method to improve availability and accessibility is useful in improving information utilization in decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

Rule of law and accountability are the main components of good governance. Circulars and other guidelines are part of it as transparency and openness allow others to know what is happening¹. Regulations and procedures give information to make decisions transparently and confidently leaving a lesser opportunity for doubt. Utilization of information can be assessed by evaluating the availability (presence for immediate use) and the accessibility (ease of use)³. This indicates the importance of circulars and other related documents in the context of good governance.

A significant number of circulars are issued by central and provincial authorities in Sri Lanka. These officials issue circulars on a wide range of subjects. Many of the circulars are issued on financial management, general administration, human resource management, and various technical aspects of the preventive and curative sectors of health. Studying the utilization of circulars in routine work and decision-making in the government health sector is the research problem addressed by this study.

General objective

To assess the perceptions on the utilization of circulars in decision-making and the level of

utilization of circulars in selected subject areas, by senior and middle-level managers at the Provincial Directorate of Health Services (PDHS) office of Western Province

Specific objectives

1.To assess the perceptions on utilization of circulars among senior and middle-level managers in decision making

2.To assess the availability and accessibility to circulars among senior and middle-level managers of specified divisions in the PDHS office, through case scenarios based on circulars issued since the year 2000.

METHODOLOGY

This is a cross-sectional descriptive study. The study Setting was the PDHS office of Western Province. All senior managers ($n_1=4$) at the office except the Provincial Director and all the middle-level managers, management assistants, and development

officers ($n_2=24$) were included in the study population ($n_1+n_2=28$). A self-administered pre-validated questionnaire was used to assess the perceptions of the utilization of circulars.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

1.Section one- Socio-demographic features

2.Section two- Perceptions on utilization of circulars

3.Section three- Case scenario based on circulars

Variables affecting information utilization were identified through relevant literature^{3,4,5,6,7} and further refined by the opinion of the subject experts. Questions were peer-reviewed before pretesting. Case scenarios were developed to assess the utilization of circulars and all of those were developed prior to the commencement of the study. Questions were based on the facts in

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Features of the respondents

Description				
Age	25- 35	36- 45	>46	
	17 (60.7)	08 (28.6)	03 (10.6)	
Gender	Female (%)		Male (%)	
	23 (82.1)		05 (17.9)	
Section	F	A	E	P
	07 (25%)	08 (28.6%)	07 (25%)	06 (21.4%)
Duration in the present station/ post	5 or <5years	6- 10	>10	
	23 (82.1%)	03 (10.7%)	02 (7.1%)	

F- Financial A- Administration E- Establishment P- Planning

the circulars. Statistical analysis of the data was performed utilizing SPSS version 21. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Board of the Colombo South Teaching Hospital (CSTH), Kalubowila.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic features

There were 28 senior and middle-level managers who took part in the study. The socio-demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Over sixty percent (n=17) of the participants of this study belong to the age group of 25 to 35 years. Most of the middle and upper-level managerial staff were females (80%). An equal distribution of officers was observed between the four main sections (Planning,

Finance, Establishment, and Administration) of the PDHS office. The percentage of the officers possessing less than 5 years of working experience at the office was nearly 80%.

Perceptions on utilization of information (circulars)

The results of the assessment of the information-seeking behavior of the senior and mid-level officials of the PDHS office are summarized in Table 2.

Many of the respondents were aware of the usefulness of circulars in their work. The average means of all concerned variables were above 3. It indicated that the respondents positively agreed with those attributes.

The most preferred form of searching for a circular was the circular file (78%), and the

Table 2: Information (circular) seeking behavior of the senior and middle-level officials

Variable	Number	*Mean	Standard Deviation
Circulars are important for daily duties	26	3.92	1.164
Had Occasions to refer circulars	25	3.88	0.781
Affect the efficiency of job	26	3.92	1.354

**Mean value of the Likert scale. The range of the scale 1 to 5*

Table 3: Preferred source of information sought by the middle and senior-level managers

Variable	Number responded	Positive response (%)
Internet	27	19 (67.5)
Refer circular file	26	22 (78.0)
Search in record room	21	13 (46.0)
Inquire a colleague	24	20 (71.0)

Table 4: Employee perception over the dimensions of circular availability and accessibility

Indicator	Variable	Number	Mean	Standard deviation
Availability	Availability of circulars in the office of PDHS	26	3.15	1.008
	Availability of circular files	21	3.05	.805
	Organized system is available	21	2.00	1.095
	Adequate space to keep circulars	26	2.92	1.197
	Overall availability	20	11.95/20	2.929
Accessibility	Ease of use	24	2.38	1.408
	Distance to the source	21	2.52	1.569
	Available on the internet	22	4.23	.752
	Overall accessibility	20	9.4/15	3.18
Overall Utilization of information			21.7/35	5.6

**Mean value of the Likert scale. The range of the scale 1 to 5*

least preferred form was searching for it in the record room (46%). A significant proportion of officials preferred to inquire from a colleague (71%).

The most preferred form of searching for a circular was the circular file (78%), and the least preferred form was searching for it in the record room (46%). A significant proportion of officials preferred to inquire from a colleague (71%).

The mean value for the necessity of an alternative method to maintain and store

circulars was 3.43. It denotes neither agrees nor disagrees kind of conclusion at the end. On the other hand, the view to keep circulars available on the internet received a very strong positive response ($\bar{x}=4.33$).

Case scenarios

Only seven officials responded to the given case scenario, and all scored low marks.

DISCUSSION

This project mainly concentrated on the utilization of information by improving the accessibility of circulars in decision-making. The information-seeking behavior was

Table 5: Respondents' view to improve the information utilization

Variable	Number	Mean	Standard deviation
Need alternative method	21	3.43	1.502
Good to keep in internet	24	4.33	1.049

**Mean value of the Likert scale. The range of the scale 1 to 5*

Table 6: Average marks obtained for the case scenarios

Section	Marks		
	<35%	36-75%	>76%
Finance	02	-	-
Establishment	01	-	-
Administration	01	-	-
Planning	03	-	-
All case scenarios	n= 7, $\bar{x}$ =22, SD= 9.93		

checked via three variables and all the attributes scored a mean value exceeding 3, thus indicating that the respondents were well aware of the usefulness of the knowledge about circulars in their routine work. Most of them perceived that knowledge about the circulars is important in their daily duties and improves the efficiency of their work. A similar kind of attribute was studied from a different perspective in Nigeria. They studied whether there is any relationship between educational qualifications and decision-making based on information⁴. The same study investigated information accessibility and utilization as factors influencing the decision-making of managers in commercial banks in Nigeria. The study revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between academic qualifications and information utilization in decision-making.

The most preferred path to seeking information was searching in the circular file (78%). They had an equal perception that the circulars could be accessible through the internet too (67.5%). The percentage who inquired from a colleague was 71%. The perceived availability of information at the PDHS office was not satisfactory as per the results. Indicators that checked for availability scored below average. The mean score attributable to availability was 2.9. The lowest mean was observed ($\bar{x}$ =2) in 'having an organized system to keep circulars.'

The utilization of the available information was also poor. It was reflected in the average marks obtained for the case scenarios. Although almost an average rate of response was observed ($\bar{x}$ =3) for the availability of circular files, it was noticed that a significant proportion of provincial and central-level circulars were not available at the office of PDHS. Accessibility was tested by three variables and the highest mean was observed in accessing the internet ($\bar{x}$ =4.2), while the lowest mean was observed in the ease of use of the available circulars ($\bar{x}$ =2.3). Accessibility of information is also an area of interest in research and several studies of engineers' information-seeking behavior have found that accessibility was the factor that influenced most of their selection of information sources⁵. A study by Raya in a group of engineers found that the most accessible information source was one that requires the least effort. Factors of accessibility were 'sources I know', 'saves time', and 'physical closeness'⁵.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Availability and accessibility of information were poor even though the perception of information utilization was high among the senior and middle-level officers of the office of PDHS. The most preferred method in finding a circular is through circular files which are expected to maintain by the

management assistants. Respondents believed that having alternative methods to improve circular availability was appropriate, preferably on an internet-based platform. Therefore, it is recommended that the respective administrative authorities pay due attention to that regard. To establish good governance practices in the health sector, decisions need to be transparent and yet based on valid information. Circulars are one form of information used in decision-making. Thus, IT-based circular inventory is recommended for better accessibility of information.

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