

Cambridge AS & A Level · Business 9609 · Notes

Business communication A2

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Last checked 5 October 2026

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What you need to know

By the end of this topic you should be able to:

1. **Purposes of communication.** Say in which situations a business cannot work without good communication.
2. **Methods of communication.** Describe the standard methods a business uses (spoken, written, electronic and visual) and weigh the strengths and weaknesses of each.
3. **Channels of communication.** Explain how communication works inside a business: the difference between one-way and two-way communication, the difference between vertical and horizontal communication, and the problems that different channels can cause.
4. **Barriers to communication.** Identify what stops a message getting through, and how each barrier can be overcome.
5. **The role of management.** Explain what informal communication does inside a business, how communication affects how efficiently a business runs, and how communication could be improved in a given situation.

Organisation charts, the chain of command and span of control are in organisational structure; motivation theory is in the motivation topic.

Understand it

What communication is for

Communication is passing information from one person or group to another so that it is **received and understood**. A message that arrives but is misread has not been communicated.

Communication is essential when a business:

- **gives instructions and sets targets**, so each person knows what to do, by when and to what standard;
- **co-ordinates departments**, so that marketing's promotion, operations' output and finance's budget all match;

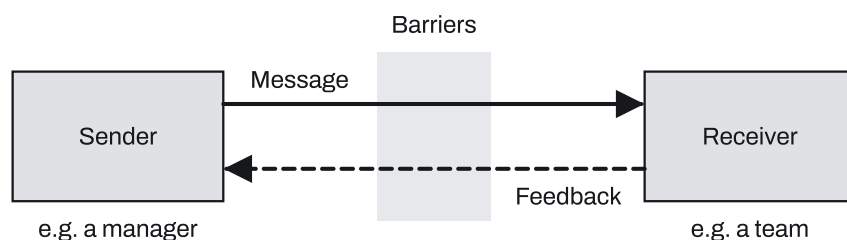
- **introduces change** (a new system, a new structure, job losses), when staff need to know what is happening and why, or they resist it;
- **keeps people safe and within the law**: safety procedures, hygiene rules, data protection;
- **involves and motivates staff**: feedback on their work, appraisals, consulting them on decisions, listening to their ideas;
- **deals with people outside the business**: customers (orders, complaints, product information), suppliers (specifications, delivery dates), investors and the government;
- **handles a crisis**, such as a product recall or an IT failure, when everyone affected must hear quickly and accurately.

Communication **inside** the business (between managers, employees and departments) is **internal**; communication with customers, suppliers and others is **external**. Questions in this topic are usually about internal communication.

How communication works

Every act of communication has the same parts:

Part	Meaning
Sender	The person or group who starts the message
Message	The information, instruction or idea being passed on
Method (medium)	The form the message takes: spoken, written, electronic or visual
Channel	The route the message travels through the business, for example down the chain of command from a director to a team
Receiver	The person or group the message is meant for
Feedback	The receiver's reply, which shows the sender whether the message was understood



One-way: message only. Two-way: message and feedback.

One-way communication goes from sender to receiver with no reply: a notice on a wall, an email sent to all staff, a recorded announcement. It is quick and suits simple, routine information, but the sender cannot tell whether the message was understood and the receiver cannot ask questions or add ideas.

Two-way communication includes feedback: a conversation, a meeting with questions, a reply to an email, a staff survey whose results are discussed. It is slower, but misunderstandings are spotted and put right, staff feel listened to, and managers learn things they would otherwise never hear.

Methods of communication

Method	Examples	Strengths	Weaknesses
Spoken	Face-to-face talks, meetings, team briefings, phone and video calls, interviews	Immediate feedback and questions; tone and body language add meaning; personal, good for sensitive news and for persuading	No permanent record; can be misremembered or misheard; meetings with many people take a lot of time; hard for complex detail
Written	Letters, reports, memos, notices, manuals, newsletters, contracts	A permanent record that can be checked later; suits detailed or technical information and legal matters; the same wording reaches everyone	Slow to produce; feedback is delayed or missing; long documents may not be read; tone can be misjudged
Electronic	Email, intranet, instant messaging, shared online platforms, video conferencing, social media	Fast and cheap, even over long distances; reaches many people at once; keeps a searchable record; can link to data and files	Depends on the technology working; too many messages cause overload; easy to ignore or misread; security risks; not everyone has access or skills
Visual	Charts, graphs, diagrams, signs, posters, presentations, videos, colour codes	Quick to take in; clear for numbers, trends, layouts and safety warnings; crosses language barriers	Can be misread without explanation; cannot carry much detail or nuance; takes skill to design well

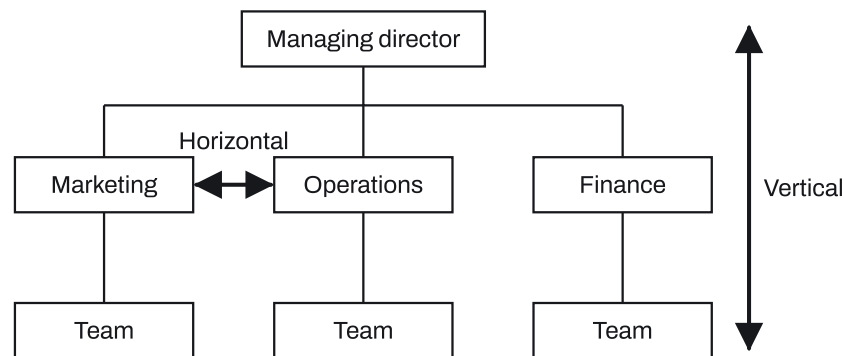
Methods are often combined: a manager announces a change at a team briefing (spoken, two-way) and then emails a written summary (a record), with a chart showing the new targets (visual).

Choosing a method depends on the message and the receiver:

- **How complex** it is: detail and figures need writing or visuals; a simple update can be spoken or sent electronically.
- **How urgent** it is: spoken and electronic methods are fastest.
- **How sensitive** it is: bad news about someone's job needs a face-to-face talk, followed by a letter.
- **Whether a record is needed**: contracts, warnings and procedures must be written.
- **How many receivers, and where**: electronic methods reach large or scattered groups; a small team in one place can meet.
- **Cost and time**: meetings take many people away from their work.

Channels: vertical and horizontal

A **channel** is the route a message takes. **Formal channels** are set by the business's structure: messages follow the chain of command or go between departments in an official way. **Informal channels** are the unofficial conversations between staff, often called the **grapevine**.



Vertical: between levels. Horizontal: at the same level.

- **Vertical communication** passes between levels of the hierarchy. **Downward**: instructions, targets, policies, feedback on performance. **Upward**: reports, problems, suggestions, complaints. A business with only downward communication loses the information that staff at the bottom have.
- **Horizontal (lateral) communication** passes between people at the same level, often in different departments: two department heads agreeing a launch date, or production and quality staff solving a fault together. It is how departments co-ordinate without sending everything up to the top.

Problems with channels

- **Long chains distort and delay.** In a tall structure a message passes through many people; each may shorten, change or hold it, so it arrives late and altered. Feedback from the bottom takes just as long to rise.
- **Downward-only channels.** If messages only go down, staff stop raising problems, ideas are lost and managers decide without full information.
- **Blocked upward channels.** Staff may not report bad news if they fear the reaction, so managers hear about problems too late.
- **Weak horizontal links.** In a functional structure departments may talk mainly to their own director, so work is duplicated, plans clash and one department learns of another's decision late.
- **Bypassing the channel.** A director who gives orders straight to a team, skipping its manager, undermines that manager and leaves them unaware of what their team has been asked to do.
- **Too many channels or messages.** When the same information arrives by several routes, or every message is copied to everyone, people stop reading and important items are missed.

Barriers to communication

A **barrier** is anything that stops a message being sent, received or understood as the sender meant.

Barrier	Example	How to overcome it
The sender: unclear message, jargon, too much detail, wrong method	An engineer's report full of technical terms sent to the sales team	Plain language for the receiver; one clear point at a time; choose the method to suit the message
The receiver: not listening, overloaded, distrusts the sender, lacks the background knowledge	Staff who expect bad news ignore a manager's reassurance	Build trust by keeping promises; brief people in advance; keep messages short and targeted
The method or technology: noise, a failed system, poor signal, no access	A safety announcement over loudspeakers in a loud workshop	Combine methods (sign plus briefing); maintain systems and have a back-up; give staff access and training
Too many links in the channel	An instruction from a director reaches the shop floor after four levels, changed at each one	Fewer levels; send key messages directly as well as down the chain; put them in writing
Distance and working patterns	Staff on different sites or shifts never meet	Video calls, shared online platforms, handover notes, overlapping shift time
Language and culture: different first languages, different meanings of words or gestures	A request that sounds polite in one culture sounds rude in another	Translation, simple wording, cultural training, visual methods
Attitudes and status: managers who do not listen; staff afraid to speak	Junior staff stay silent in a meeting led by a director	A management style that invites views; anonymous suggestion schemes; smaller meetings
No feedback	A notice is pinned up and no one checks it was read	Two-way methods; ask receivers to confirm or explain back what they understood

Informal communication

Informal communication happens in conversations at breaks, in chat groups between colleagues and through friendships across departments. It cannot be switched off, and managers can work with it.

- **Benefits:** it is fast; it builds relationships and team spirit; it fills gaps that formal channels leave; it lets staff solve problems quickly without going through managers; managers who listen to it learn how staff really feel.
- **Drawbacks:** it spreads **rumours** and half-truths, especially when staff are worried and formal information is missing; it can carry gossip that damages relationships; it cannot be controlled or checked; staff outside the group miss what it carries.

Managers reduce the harm by telling staff the facts early and honestly, so rumours have less to feed on, and by keeping in touch with the grapevine to hear concerns sooner.

Communication and efficiency

Efficiency means getting the most output from the resources used. Communication affects it in several ways:

Good communication	Poor communication
Staff know exactly what to do, so fewer mistakes and less rework	Errors, wasted materials and work done twice
Departments co-ordinate, so plans fit together and nothing is held up	Departments wait for each other or work against each other
Problems reported upward are fixed quickly	Problems grow before managers hear of them
Staff feel informed and involved, so motivation is higher and labour turnover and absence are lower	Staff feel ignored, motivation falls and good staff leave, which raises recruitment and training costs
Changes are understood and accepted more readily	Rumours and resistance slow change down; disputes may disrupt work
Customers get accurate information and are satisfied	Wrong information to customers leads to complaints and lost sales

Communication also has a **cost**: meetings use paid time, systems cost money, and too much communication wastes time just as too little causes mistakes.

The role of management in improving communication

Managers decide the methods, the channels and the culture. In a given situation, they can:

- **match the method to the message** (for example, written detail plus a meeting for questions when introducing a complex change);
- **add two-way channels**: team briefings with questions, suggestion schemes, staff surveys whose results are acted on, regular one-to-one meetings;
- **shorten channels**: remove levels, or let key messages go straight to everyone affected;
- **strengthen horizontal links**: cross-department teams, shared online platforms, regular meetings between department heads;
- **train staff and managers** in communication skills, such as writing clearly and listening;
- **cut overload**: send messages only to those who need them, keep them short, say what action is required;
- **change attitudes**: a management style that invites views, and managers who respond to what staff say.

Which way is best depends on the cause of the problem (method, channel, barrier or attitude), the cost, how quickly a fix is needed and whether staff and managers will accept it.

Key facts and formulas

There is no formula list in the 9609 exam, and this topic has no formulas. "Learn it" means you must remember it.

Fact	Status
Communication: passing information from a sender to a receiver so that it is received and understood	Learn it
The parts of communication: sender, message, method (medium), channel, receiver, feedback	Learn it
The four methods of communication: spoken, written, electronic, visual	Learn it
One-way communication: from sender to receiver with no feedback; two-way communication includes feedback	Learn it
Vertical communication passes between levels of the hierarchy (up or down); horizontal communication passes between people at the same level	Learn it
Formal channels follow the business's structure; informal communication (the grapevine) is unofficial contact between staff	Learn it
Barrier to communication: anything that stops a message being sent, received or understood as intended	Learn it

How to do it

We have tagged 5 questions on this topic, asked in 2021, 2023 and 2024, all from the Paper 3 case study. Each is one type, so the counts add up to 5.

Question type	Questions
Analyse the drawbacks of a business's communication methods or system	2
Analyse the benefits of a business's communication methods	1
Analyse the impact of barriers to communication	1
Evaluate the best way to improve communication	1

The marks are for four skills: **K** (knowledge: a correct definition or point), **App** (application: using facts from the case to support a point, not copying them), **An** (analysis: a chain of causes and consequences) and **Eval** (evaluation: a supported judgement). Below, (K), (App), (An) and (Eval) after a sentence show the mark it earns.

How Paper 3 marks them. "Analyse" questions since 2023 are worth **8** (2 K, 2 App, 4 An). The 2021 "Evaluate" question was worth **16** (2 K, 2 App, 6 An, 6 Eval); evaluate questions are now worth **12** (2 K, 2 App, 2 An, 6 Eval). In an 8-mark answer:

- **K:** a definition earns at most one mark; the other comes from naming a relevant point (a benefit, drawback or barrier). Two relevant points earn both.
- **App:** at most one mark per point, so each point needs its own case fact.
- **An:** one link in the chain is Level 1 (1–2 marks); two or more links is Level 2 (3–4 marks). One very well developed point can reach 3 marks, but 4 needs both points developed.

1. Analyse the drawbacks of a business's communication methods or system (2 questions)

The case describes how the business passes information to its staff now, or a new electronic system it plans to introduce, and asks for two limitations or disadvantages.

1. **Identify the methods and channels** in the case: who talks to whom, how often, by which method, and whether anyone can reply.
2. **K:** define internal communication, or the change being made (a **process innovation** is a new method or technology for doing the business's work), for one mark. Name each drawback in a few words: "one-way: staff cannot ask questions", "written reports give no quick feedback", "the new system may fail".
3. **App:** tie each drawback to its own case fact: how many staff, how often meetings are held, who is left out, what the new system would replace.
4. **An:** two or more links to an outcome for **this** business: managers hear of problems only at a monthly meeting → a fault continues for weeks → more faulty output is made → costs rise.

Variations you will meet:

- **Limitations of the methods it uses now:** look for one-way communication, spoken messages that are easily misread, large meetings where people will not speak up, written reports with no reply, departments that never talk to each other, and methods that waste a manager's time.
- **Disadvantages of a new communication system:** the cost and the finance it needs, staff resisting the change, training time and cost, the system failing, and spoken contact being lost. Only disadvantages earn marks.
- In both, only the best two points are marked.

2. Analyse the benefits of a business's communication methods (1 question)

The case describes several methods the business uses with its employees, and asks for two benefits.

1. **K:** define internal communication or one- and two-way communication (one mark), then name two benefits: fewer misunderstandings, better co-ordination, staff having a say in decisions, managers getting feedback, motivation, rumours stopped, lower costs or lower labour turnover.
2. **App:** name the actual method in the case that brings each benefit, and what it achieves there. Repeating the case's description is not application.
3. **An:** chain each benefit to an outcome: staff raise a supplier problem at a briefing → managers switch supplier before stocks run out → production continues → orders go out on time.

Only benefits earn marks. Name the **methods of communication**: answers about training or leadership style in general miss the question.

3. Analyse the impact of barriers to communication (1 question)

The case shows a feature of the business (for example, it works through the internet, across countries, or across sites) and asks how two barriers arising from it could affect the business.

1. **K**: define a barrier to communication (one mark) and name two that the case makes likely: language, culture, distance, technology failure, wrong or incomplete information, overload.
2. **App**: show **why** each barrier arises in this business, from the case.
3. **An**: carry each barrier to its impact: a request is misread → the wrong order is supplied → it has to be redone at the business's own cost → profit falls, and the customer is less likely to order again.

Write one paragraph for each barrier, so the examiner can see two separate developed points. Only barriers are rewarded.

4. Evaluate the best way to improve communication (1 question)

Old Paper 3, 16 marks (2021): the most effective way for a business to improve communication between two groups, such as line managers and their staff. Now it would be 12 marks.

1. **K**: definitions and terms: effective communication (with feedback), methods, formal and informal, one-way and two-way, vertical and horizontal, barriers. Any of methods, channels, barriers or the role of management can be the focus.
2. **App**: find the cause of the problem in the case: centralised decisions, only downward messages, staff working alone, a change staff do not understand, signs of discontent such as absence or low productivity.
3. **An**: develop two or three possible ways, each with its benefit and its limit: a mobile app that updates prices automatically → staff in the field always quote the current price → fewer orders are cancelled; but where the signal is weak → the app shows old prices unless it works offline → the errors continue.
4. **Eval**: choose **one** way as the most effective and justify it from the case. Weigh what it depends on: whether managers' attitudes and style will change, the culture, the cost and time, staff's willingness, training, and the short against the long term. Say why the other ways are less effective here.

A list of ideas with no choice cannot reach the top marks; neither can a choice with no reasons from the case.

Worked examples

Example 1

Copperleaf Dental (CD) runs 5 dental clinics with 70 staff. Every morning, each clinic holds a 10-minute meeting where its dentists, nurses and receptionists go through the day's appointments and raise any problems. Each clinic manager sends a one-page written summary of the week's problems to CD's director

every Friday, and the director replies to each summary by the following Monday.

Analyse two benefits to CD of the methods it uses to communicate with employees. [8]

Benefit 1: better co-ordination within each clinic. Two-way spoken communication lets people raise problems and agree action straight away (K). At CD's morning meetings, receptionists hear from the dentists which treatments are likely to run long (App), so they can move or space out later appointments, patients spend less time waiting and fewer appointments are cancelled, so each clinic treats more patients a day and earns more revenue (An).

Benefit 2: the director spots problems shared across clinics. Upward written communication gives managers a record of problems they would not see themselves (K). Because the director reads all 5 clinics' summaries every week and replies by Monday (App), a fault that appears at two clinics, such as a supplier's materials arriving late, is noticed as a pattern and dealt with once for the whole business, so treatments are not postponed and CD avoids losing patients to other dentists (An).

That is 2 K + 2 App + 4 An = 8. No judgement is needed.

Example 2

Harbourline Freight (HF) arranges the transport and customs paperwork for its clients' imports. Its 120 staff work in 3 offices. Sales staff and customs specialists now discuss urgent problems by phone. HF plans to replace phone calls and email with one online platform, where every shipment has its own message thread. HF handles about 900 shipments a week. Each thread is expected to carry about 8 messages, and every message will send an alert to the 6 staff who work on that shipment. Staff will get half a day of training.

Analyse two disadvantages to HF of its proposed communication system. [8]

Disadvantage 1: urgent questions wait. Written electronic messages give no immediate feedback, unlike a phone call (K). A customs specialist who finds a missing document can no longer ring the salesperson and settle it in a minute; the question sits in a thread until it is read (App). If it is read hours later, the shipment is held at the port, HF's client pays storage charges and gets the goods late, and the client may move its business to a rival forwarder (An).

Disadvantage 2: information overload. Too many messages are a barrier, because receivers stop reading them carefully (K). 900 shipments with 8 messages each, every message alerting 6 staff, is 43,200 alerts a week: an average of 360 for each of HF's 120 staff, or about 72 every working day of a 5-day week (App). Staff begin to skim or mute the alerts, so an important change to a customs rule is missed, a declaration is filled in wrongly and HF may be fined, which raises its costs and harms its reputation for accuracy (An).

That is 2 K + 2 App + 4 An = 8.

Example 3

Terrafield Supplies (TS) sells seeds and fertiliser to farms. Its 48 sales representatives work in 3 rural regions and visit head office about twice a year. Every Monday, head office emails them a 20-page price and product update. A survey in 2025 found that 18 of the 48 representatives had not opened the last update, and that

most felt the reports they sent to head office about what farmers wanted were never answered. In the same year, 2 large orders were cancelled after farmers were quoted out-of-date prices. Phone signal is weak on many farms.

Evaluate the most effective way for TS's managers to improve communication with its sales representatives.
[12]

Knowledge. Effective communication means the message is received, understood and acted on, with feedback to the sender (K). TS's current method is one-way, written and electronic, sent down the hierarchy (K).

Option 1: a sales app with live prices and a feedback form. $\frac{18}{48} = 37.5\%$ of representatives did not open the update, and 2 large orders were lost to old prices (App). If the prices on each representative's phone update automatically, no one has to read a long document to find the current price, so quotes are correct and orders are not cancelled; a form for farmers' requests sends information upward in the same app (An). But with weak signal on farms, the app must store prices when offline, or representatives may still quote old ones (An).

Option 2: a weekly video call for each region. A 30-minute call lets managers explain changes and representatives ask questions, so it is two-way and gives managers feedback on what farmers want. But the representatives spend their days on farms with weak signal (App), and 3 calls a week take managers' and representatives' time without fixing price errors between calls.

Judgement. The app is the most effective way, because TS's most costly problem is out-of-date prices, and the app removes it at the source instead of relying on 48 people reading a 20-page document (Eval). It also gives representatives the upward channel they lack (Eval). However, it only works if head office answers what representatives send: the survey shows they already feel ignored, so without a change in managers' attitude, the feedback form will soon be ignored too (Eval). Its success also depends on the offline function and on the representatives being trained to use it (Eval). In the short term, a monthly regional call alongside the app would rebuild trust, as representatives could see managers responding to their reports (Eval). In the long term, TS should compare the app's cost with the value of orders lost to price errors and of the farmers' requests it now misses (Eval).

The marks: 2 K, 2 App, 2 An, and 6 Eval for a justified choice in TS's context that weighs the alternatives and says what success depends on.

Common mistakes

- **Answering about the wrong kind of communication.** If the question asks how the business communicates with its own staff, writing about advertising or customers earns nothing. Check whether it is internal or external.
- **Developing only one of the two points.** Many answers build a full chain for the first point and leave the second as a bare statement. Each point needs its own case fact and its own chain of at least two links.
- **Drifting off the methods.** In a question about communication methods, answers that discuss pay, training or leadership in general miss the marks. Name the method (meeting, report, notice, platform) and say what it does.

- **Writing both sides when only one is asked.** "Benefits" questions give nothing for drawbacks, and "barriers" questions give nothing for the strengths of the system.
- **Mixing the two points in one paragraph.** Write one paragraph per point so each can be marked separately.
- **Mixing up method and channel.** The method is the form (spoken, written, electronic, visual); the channel is the route (vertical, horizontal, formal, informal).
- **Calling every electronic message two-way.** An email to all staff that invites no reply is one-way, even though staff could reply.
- **Recommending with no reasons.** In an evaluate question, "they should hold more meetings" is not a judgement. Say why it suits this business better than the alternatives, and what could stop it working (managers who do not listen, staff unwilling to change, cost).

How to get the marks

- **Command words.** *Analyse* (8 marks): two points, each with knowledge, a case fact and a chain of two or more links; no judgement. *Evaluate*: develop more than one option, then choose and justify the most effective in the business's context, saying what it depends on.
- **One mark for a definition**, and only when it is precise: communication with the idea of being understood; a barrier as something that stops a message getting through or being understood; two-way with feedback.
- **Application means using the case**, not repeating it: say what the case fact shows ("the director replies within a day, so problems are acted on quickly").
- **Chains end in a business outcome**: costs, output, quality, sales, revenue, profit, labour turnover or reputation. "Staff are confused" is a start, not an end.
- **Use the right terms**: one-way and two-way, vertical and horizontal, formal and informal, barrier, feedback, overload. They show knowledge and make your chains precise.
- **Exactly the number of points asked for.** Extra points are not marked; the best two are.

Quick check

1. Classify each as one-way or two-way, and as vertical or horizontal: (a) a director emails all staff the new opening hours and asks for no replies; (b) the finance manager and the marketing manager agree next year's advertising budget in a meeting; (c) employees put ideas into a suggestion scheme, and senior managers write back to each one.
2. Which method suits each message best, and why? (a) A new fire escape route in a warehouse with 400 staff. (b) Telling an employee that their job will be cut. (c) Sending a supplier the exact measurements of a part.
3. A software engineer explains a delay to the sales team using technical terms. The sales staff misunderstand and promise customers the wrong date. Name the barrier and give one way to overcome it.
4. Explain one way in which informal communication could reduce a business's efficiency. **[3]**

Answers

1. (a) One-way, vertical (downward). (b) Two-way, horizontal. (c) Two-way, vertical (upward, with a reply downward).
2. (a) Visual and spoken: floor-plan signs along the route, plus a briefing and a practice drill, because staff must recognise the route quickly and in noise, and a drill checks they have understood. (b) Spoken, face to face, followed by a letter: the news is sensitive and the employee needs to ask questions, and the letter is a legal record. (c) Written or electronic (a technical drawing or specification): exact detail must be kept and checked, and a spoken message could be misheard.
3. Jargon (the sender's language). Overcome it by explaining in plain words for the receiver and checking understanding, for example by asking the sales staff to say back the new date, or by following up with a short written summary.
4. Informal communication spreads rumours that cannot be checked (K). A rumour that a branch will close, though nothing has been decided, leads staff to spend work time discussing it and worrying (An), so effort falls and absence rises, and output per worker drops until managers give the facts (An).

Past questions to try

- **9609/31/M/J/23 Q2:** two limitations of a business's methods of internal communication.
- **9609/33/M/J/23 Q1:** how two barriers to communication from an online business model affect the business.
- **9609/31/O/N/21 Q3:** evaluating the most effective way to improve communication between line managers and employees.