

Communications in the factory workplace

Misunderstandings between workers and managers occur due to ineffective systems of communication, including a lack of grievance mechanisms

In a survey leading up to the 2019 Myanmar Buyers Forum in Yangon, when garment buyers were asked which issue concerned them most when sourcing product in Myanmar “industrial relations and labour disputes” was among the top selected concerns.

What are some common sources of dissatisfaction for garment workers in Myanmar?

- Uncomfortable or unsafe working environment – not enough space, unclean canteens & toilets; too hot in production area; hygienic drinking water not available; inadequate personal protection equipment and insufficient first aid.
- Buses crowded and unsafe to/from factory.
- Bonuses and production targets are not coherently set and are communicated poorly.
- Little opportunity to progress or get promoted, even if loyal and hard working. Workers also want more opportunities for skills training.
- Working hours are too much (excessive overtime).
- Manager or supervisor shouts too much and does not listen to feedback.
- Applying for legally entitled leave is very difficult.

Interestingly, when SMART Myanmar’s factory assessors interview workers, low pay rates often rank lower than the above mentioned items, although low pay is also a source of dissatisfaction. SMART uses a “**gap analysis method**” in which key criteria are examined for the widest gap between worker expectation and satisfaction.



Employees link sleeves on sweaters at a factory near the Thilawa Special Economic Zone in Yangon Division.

Recommended priorities for improvement

- Ensure different channels are fully established for communications between workers and management. At minimum, this ought to include a functional workplace coordination committee (WCC) - involving the trade union if there is one - and suggestion box system.
- Reward employees for suggestions which result in savings or safety improvements.
- Post clear visual descriptions on how bonus systems work, including pictures or simple charts. Communicate very clearly the bonus policies.
- Dedicate time to coach and train supervisors on being effective communicators and leaders.
- Conduct internal self-assessments on a semi-annual basis. Train HR staff in how to interview workers and conduct performance reviews.
- Inspire and motivate workers by creating career advancement pathways. Tell the helpers how they can become operators. Tell the operators how they can become supervisors. Tell the supervisors how they can become assistant managers.
- If the factory is managed by a foreign management team, ensure at minimum two local & bi-lingual managers are on-boarded and empowered with real responsibilities within the first half-year of operations. SMART has observed that factories where this is not the case face a severely higher risk of industrial action because problems are less readily identified and communicated.
- Provide the trade union or other worker representatives of the WCC with a dedicated room in which to meet and with basic office resources, such as a computer, a printer and office supplies.

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What can factories do better?

Communications within a large workforce will always require systems-based approaches and clear & consistent policies.

- 1) Ensure factory human resources policies provide a good foundation on which to build a trustful and respectful work environment.**
- 2) Ensure the HR team is large enough for the responsibilities given. A large factory needs a dedicated HR manager and assistants, as well as a dedicated compliance manager and an occupational safety and health officer (this last item is a legal requirement in Myanmar since March, 2019).**
- 3) Build a trustful relationship with employee representatives. If the factory has a trade union, the elected representatives of that union are there for regular communications with management. If there is no trade union,**

the employee representatives of the WCC must serve a similar role.

Many factories in the Myanmar garment industry are newly established. It is unrealistic to expect a company in which managers and staff have not previously received specialized education or training to be fully capable of taking on the challenging assignment of building up a new factory to the latest international standards. Factory managers and staff are encouraged to join the programs of SMART Myanmar, the International Labour Organization and other international partners to set-up good internal workplace communications and cooperation as a foundation for business success.

To learn more about SMART Myanmar visit:

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The statements in this research note represent the views of SMART Myanmar and do not necessarily reflect the view of the European Union.



A garment factory in Patheingyi which participated in the SMART Management Systems Program. This factory is now on track to become the first LEED Platinum certified factory in Myanmar.