

---

# Bridging Traditions and Technology: The Evolving Landscape of Business Communication in Cambodia

*By Shamila Ramjawan  
Lecturer, CamEd Business School*

## Introduction

Cambodia, a Southeast Asian nation rich in culture and history, has witnessed a remarkable transformation over the past few decades. From post-conflict reconstruction to rapid economic growth, the country's business environment has evolved significantly. As Cambodia integrates more deeply into regional and global markets, the need for effective business communication has never been more critical. This evolution is not merely about the adoption of modern tools and technologies; it is also about reconciling traditional communication norms with the demands of an increasingly interconnected business landscape.

Business communication in Cambodia is shaped by a unique confluence of factors: deeply rooted cultural values, a growing youthful workforce, the legacy of historical disruptions, and the expanding influence of digital technologies. Understanding these elements is essential for local entrepreneurs, international investors, and professionals who engage with Cambodian enterprises. Unlike many other economies, Cambodia presents a refined landscape where business etiquette, hierarchy, language use, and non-verbal cues significantly impact communication effectiveness.

In today's Cambodian marketplace, communication takes on various forms being from formal written proposals and government-facing documentation to social media interactions and video conferencing. Yet, beneath this surface-level diversity lies a set of challenges. Language barriers, digital literacy gaps, and varying expectations across generations and business sectors complicate the flow of clear and consistent messaging.

## Historical Context of Business Communication in Cambodia

Cambodia's modern business communication practices have roots in both its ancient traditions and its more recent history. For centuries, Khmer culture placed strong emphasis on respect, seniority, and formality in all interactions. Communication within communities was often face-to-face and guided by long-standing social norms. In pre-colonial times, business exchanges occurred within tightly knit networks, often based on trust and reputation rather than formal documentation.

The French colonial period introduced new administrative structures, bureaucratic language, and a shift toward more written communication in official matters. However, these changes did not erase local customs. Instead, there was a blending of Western formats with traditional modes of expression. After independence and especially following the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia had to rebuild much of its institutional and commercial infrastructure. Communication during this recovery period remained largely oral and informal due to limited access to education and technology.

Since the 1990s, as Cambodia reopened to the world and began to attract foreign investment, the business environment began to change. Communication styles gradually adapted to meet the needs of international trade, joint ventures, and a growing private sector. However, many traditional patterns still influence how business is conducted today.

## Current Business Communication Practices

In the present Cambodian business setting, communication occurs across multiple channels. Face-to-face meetings remain highly valued, particularly for

---

building trust. Verbal agreements can still carry significant weight, especially among local partners. At the same time, written communication is increasingly important, especially in interactions involving contracts, proposals, and correspondence with government bodies.

Businesses now use email, messaging platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp, and increasingly, video conferencing tools such as Zoom and Google Meet. However, the level of formality and clarity in communication varies widely depending on the company size, the level of exposure to international practices, and the educational background of employees. In local businesses, communication may still rely heavily on spoken instructions and informal discussions. In contrast, foreign-owned companies and multinational firms operating in Cambodia tend to follow stricter communication protocols, with a focus on documentation, timelines, and structured reporting.

### **The Role of Culture in Communication Styles**

Cambodian culture places great importance on harmony, humility, and respect for hierarchy. These values directly influence how people speak and write in business contexts. It is common for employees to avoid direct disagreement with superiors, even if they have concerns. This can lead to misunderstandings if managers do not create a space where feedback is encouraged. Indirect language is often used to preserve politeness and avoid confrontation. For example, instead of saying that something is wrong, a Cambodian colleague might suggest that something could be improved. Foreigners unfamiliar with this style may misinterpret such comments or miss the intended message entirely.

Age and status also influence communication. Younger employees may hesitate to speak up in meetings, especially in the presence of older or more senior individuals. Understanding these cultural factors is essential for effective team communication and for developing policies that support open dialogue.

### **Language Dynamics: Khmer, English, and Multilingualism in Business**

Khmer is the national language and remains the primary medium of communication in most local businesses.

However, English has become increasingly important in sectors such as tourism, finance, and international trade. In Phnom Penh, many companies conduct meetings and write reports in English, especially when they work with foreign clients or partners.

The ability to communicate in English is often associated with higher education and better job prospects. Yet not all employees are confident in their English skills. This can lead to misunderstandings or discomfort in multilingual meetings. Some companies address this by offering language training or by appointing bilingual staff to act as intermediaries.

Chinese and Thai are also spoken in specific business communities, especially in industries with high levels of cross-border investment. As Cambodia deepens its ties with regional partners, the ability to function in multiple languages is becoming a strategic advantage.

### **Communication in SMEs vs. Large Enterprises**

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of Cambodia's economy. Many of these businesses are family-owned and operate informally. Communication in SMEs tends to be less structured and more personal. Decisions are often made quickly and communicated verbally within small teams.

In contrast, larger enterprises, particularly those with international connections, tend to adopt more formal communication systems. These may include written policies, regular reporting, and structured internal meetings. They are also more likely to invest in communication tools and staff training.

This difference in communication styles can sometimes create friction in partnerships between small and large companies. Misunderstandings can arise if expectations are not clearly aligned at the start of a business relationship. Bridging this gap requires mutual understanding and, in some cases, third-party facilitation or training support.

### **Challenges and Barriers in Business Communication**

Despite improvements in Cambodia's business communication, several challenges persist. Communication skills vary widely across regions and

---

sectors, with rural companies often lacking exposure to professional standards. This can cause delays and misunderstandings, especially with external partners.

Hierarchical structures also limit open communication. Employees may hesitate to voice opinions, fearing disrespect, which restricts feedback and innovation. Language is another hurdle. Although English is more common among young professionals, many still prefer Khmer. Bilingual settings can pose difficulties, and written communication often depends on individual education and training.

Digital tools like email and messaging apps are common but not always used effectively. Poorly structured messages and inconsistent documentation can disrupt communication.

Bridging these gaps requires awareness, training, and respect.

## **Recommendations for Improving Business Communication**

To strengthen business communication in Cambodia, a few strategic steps can be taken by organisations, policymakers, and educators.

First, companies should provide regular training in communication skills, both in Khmer and English. This includes writing professional emails, preparing reports, and using digital tools effectively. Training should also cover soft skills such as public speaking, active listening, and intercultural communication.

Second, businesses should adopt clear communication policies. These policies can set expectations for how information is shared, who is responsible for updates, and what formats are preferred. Simple templates for emails, reports, and meeting agendas can help improve consistency across teams.

Third, leaders should encourage open communication by creating a culture where feedback is welcomed. This involves actively listening to employees, asking for input, and recognising the contributions of staff at all levels. In settings where hierarchy is strong, this shift may take time but can lead to better performance and morale.

Fourth, companies that work across languages should invest in bilingual staff or translators. These individuals play a key role in bridging communication gaps and

ensuring that important messages are not lost. Where possible, bilingual documentation should be prepared, especially for policies, contracts, and training materials.

Finally, partnerships between businesses and educational institutions can support long-term improvement. By aligning university curricula with real business needs, students can graduate with stronger communication skills. Internships, workshops, and mentorships can also prepare young professionals to succeed in diverse workplaces.

## **Conclusion**

Business communication in Cambodia offers a compelling reflection of the country's evolving social and economic context. Influenced by tradition, emerging technologies, linguistic diversity, and global interaction, communication in the workplace is shaped by a complex interplay of local values and external forces. For students and scholars, this landscape provides rich opportunities to examine how communication practices influence organisational behaviour and development.

While various challenges persist, including disparities in communication skills, linguistic barriers, and the constraints of hierarchical systems, there is significant potential for progress. Educational institutions play a crucial role in equipping future professionals with the competencies needed to enhance effective and inclusive communication. This includes critical thinking, intercultural sensitivity, and digital literacy.

By integrating communication training into professional development and respecting cultural norms while promoting openness, Cambodian businesses can enhance both internal collaboration and external engagement. As the country deepens its global economic ties, communication becomes not only a practical skill but a strategic asset.

Ultimately, in Cambodia's continued economic development, effective communication must be viewed not merely as a set of tools or techniques, but as a foundational element of understanding, adaptability, and sustained organisational growth.