In every corporation, whether national or multinational, the number one goal of organisation and structure is to permit more efficient communications. Communications flow in two ways: top-down as orders and directives; bottom-up as information which will permit successive management layers to make documented and factual decisions. Both sides of the information flow must be fast, accurate, and unobstructed. Computers and communications can play a key role in this regard, but they will not substitute for rusty or poor management. Throwing money at the problem is no way to a solution.

While these statements are always valid, they do also help to size up corporations. Coping with information demands posed by national business is a pillow on which few companies can rest comfortably. It is full of uncertainty and difficulty – but also full of challenge. Analytical, and occasionally unconventional, thinking is required by executives who must be adaptable and competent. They should understand business and social conditions abroad. More than that, they must learn entirely new patterns of thought and behaviour if they are to cope successfully.

In some countries, companies have to compete with state-controlled industrial combines; in others, with privately owned monopolies. Not only do industries vary, but also the laws and regulations of business are far from being the same from country to country. The variety and complexity of multinational business are infinite. This is a basic reason why even companies which have made great strides abroad have not always found the climate favourable to their evolution.

Companies usually complain of trade barriers imposed at the frontiers, and correctly. Many of these trade barriers have been erected in the most ramshackle way imaginable. Still, while trade barriers are an impediment, the salient problem lies in communications. It is not just a matter of establishing and serving some communications channels. The requirements go much deeper, all the way to the human relations. A thorough examination of what it takes to establish a valid and functioning human organisation should be the starting point in examining organisational perspectives. All other issues are subsequent to this requirement.
OVERCOMING COMMUNICATIONS BARRIERS

Communications barriers exist between people – not just between organisational units. They may be due to different cultures, language problems, jargon and semantics, different taste and personal distaste, aggressive or defensive attitudes. In all these cases the chemistry does not work well.

When communications barriers have a low profile, we usually say that people, and therefore organisations, can communicate. But the way to start a communications study within a multinational enterprise is to consider that these barriers exist – then study ways and means for overcoming them.

Twenty-one years ago, in 1966, I made a world-wide research project on the communications subject for the American Management Association. Information for this study was obtained through lengthy interviews and correspondence with 143 people in 17 countries. Of these participants, 114 were company executives: 42 presidents, vice-presidents and other officers, 39 directors and senior managers, and 33 other members of management. The other 29 were consultants, government officials and academicians. The participants were situated in four continents. The following references highlight in the results.

The first obligation of a multinational corporation is to create sound policies to guide communication. Since such policies must be applicable throughout the company’s operations, they must have enough flexibility to cover immediate situations that are characteristic of each country.

To tackle multinational problems in an able manner, management must face head-on communications challenges, instead of shying away from them. Most executives working abroad – whether they are American, Japanese, English, Swiss, German, Italian or French – said that they had great difficulty communicating with headquarters. Subsequently most headquarters executives responded that they had no feeling of communication barriers between themselves and the subsidiaries. This lack of sensitivity should be a danger signal to corporations. The way to start examining communications barriers is by accepting the fact of life that there is a communications problem in the operations abroad. If headquarters don’t see it, that’s too bad.

The reason for underlining these facts is the need to bring to the attention of the board of directors the weak linkages in running the corporations. Satellite channels will be used to bring together the corporate executives in New York, London, Zurich and Tokyo. But is the human component ready to receive the message?

Men seasoned in international business know from experience that