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IT'S ALL ABOUT MANAGEMENT MANAGING INTERNAL COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

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Abstract: *Internal communication has become a growing discipline in modern organizations due to its significant impact on employees' performance. Today, internal communication integrates various processes, such as corporate communication, communication led by line managers, digital channels, and interpersonal communication. However, this diversity can lead to information overload and a loss of focus, as well as a challenge in internal communication management. This article presents the findings of a qualitative study that constitutes the first stage of a PhD-level research entitled: "The Relationship between Internal Communication Led by Line Managers and the Strength of Employees' Engagement in Companies". This study examines the internal communication processes based on data collected through interviews with 7 managers and 7 employees. The study has identified three core themes within internal communication processes:* ***managerial communication skills, managing corporate communication,*** *and* ***managing types of channels and methods****. Each theme illustrates a combination of key categories, i.e., sharing, listening, and the use of digital channels. Among these, managerial communication skills have emerged as the most critical process for internal communication delivery. This article not only reinforces existing literature but also highlights the pivotal role of line managers' managerial communication skills in the delivery of internal communication. Notably, this is evident even among employees whose line managers do not actively engage in communication with them.*

Keywords*: internal communication; internal communication management, communication led by managers, corporate communication, communication channels, managerial communication skills.*

JEL Classification: M

1. INTRODUCTION

Internal communication is considered one of the growing fields related to the transmission of messages within organizations (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012). In recent decades, newly-founded global research organizations dealt with the issue, among them International Association for Public Relations (IPRA), founded in

2000 in the United Kingdom; and The Global Communication Research Network (GCRN), founded in 2015.

Another example of the increasing scope of internal communication is reflected in the volume of articles about this field. A review conducted in 2020 (Lee & Yue, 2020), examined 223 articles on the topic. These articles were published in nine journals dealing with the field of communication between the years 1970-2019. The findings indicated that more than half of the studies in this field were conducted after 2011, highlighting an increasing interest in and focus on internal communication over the past decade.

The literature emphasizes the growing importance of internal communication management and the multitude of processes involved. This article presents the first part of a qualitative research, which constitutes the first stage of the methodology applied in a study on a PhD level, entitled: "The Relationship between Internal Communication Led by Line Managers and the Strength of Employees Engagement in Organization". The study aimed to examine the processes involved in managing internal communication, in order to understand which processes should be managed. Moreover, for the benefit of further research, it is necessary to understand the role of line managers in managing communication, as well as the managerial communication skills required for the initiation of effective communication processes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of Internal Communication

Among the accepted definitions, internal communication refers to the formal and informal messages and information transmitted within the organization (Kalla, 2005). Furthermore, there are definitions according to which internal communication also deals with the transmission of messages between stakeholders in the organization, including employees and employers (Tkalac Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020). The concern with stakeholders was also expressed in the definition of Welch and Jackson (2007), according to which internal communication is based on several stakeholder interfaces within the organization. These interfaces include corporate communication that is delivered through the organization communication unit, led by line managers, and communication between coworkers (Welch & Jackson, 2007).

2.2 Managing Internal Communication Dimensions and the Impact Thereof

Managing internal communications also implies managing a variety of communication dimensions (Men & Bowen, 2017). Communication dimensions refer to communication in the managerial-leadership top-down flow and bottom-up dialog; corporate communication that is transmitted by the professional communications unit of the organization; and communication between coworkers across the organization, i.e., transmitted by employees and opinion leaders (Men & Bowen, 2017).

The empirical literature asserts that managing internal communication has an impact on organizational indicators and processes, among them improving employee-organization relationships (Kim & Rhee, 2011); promoting a sense of trust among employees (Men et al., 2020); increasing employees' engagement (Mishra et al., 2014), and satisfaction (Coric et al., 2020). When internal communication is examined from a business perspective, the literature also highlights the ability of internal communication to connect employees' personal goals and objectives with organizational goals and their performance (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018).

2.3 Communication Led by Managers

Managers are one of the factors that generate communication in an organization. Communication led by managers plays an important role in motivating employees (Timm & Peterson, 2000). Motivation connects employees to goals, driving them to perform and accomplish organizational goals (Timm & Peterson, 2000). Managers who connect employees to the organization's vision also create inspiration that motivates employees (Mishra et al., 2014). Part of the communication led by managers relates to the communication of feedback and encouragement as affecting employees' effectiveness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, dealing with managers as communication leaders requires managerial skills, such as communication style, ability to listen, and the use of various communication channels (Men et al., 2020). Furthermore, line managers play an important role of driving communication in units, as noted by Erikson (cited in Forssberg & Malm, 2001). According to Erikson, managers are 'communication generators' and have an essential role in sharing organizational knowledge, as well as conveying instructions and direction for execution. The literature stipulates an evolution in managers' function, as well as their role in leading communication that creates an engine for employees' involvement (Pugh & Dietz, 2008).

2.4 Corporate Communication

One of the roles of corporate communications is sharing organizational information. (Berger, 2008). In fact, it is a traditional role of communication, namely, engaging in and exchanging information associated with the organization's activities, organizational focus, employees' role, and the market in which they operate (Berger, 2008; Men & Bowen, 2017). Moreover, corporate communication promotes employees' alignment with the organization's goals and strategic focuses (Hume & Leonard, 2014).

The promotion of listening constitutes one of the focuses of corporate communication. Active listening to employees enhances a dialogue that promotes listening to the voice of employees, mutual understanding, as well as being a motivating factor in accepting ideas raised by the employees (Park et al., 2014).

2.5 Managing Internal Communication Channels and Methods

Since McLuhan (1964) has minted the familiar expression: "The medium is the message", internal communication has developed so that each channel and each media tool encompass benefits and effects adapted to different audiences. Today, the variety of internal communication channels is wide and renewed in accordance with the dynamic media outside the organization, and its development has been intensified in the 21st century (Crescenzo, 2011). The diverse mix of communication channels includes face-to-face communication (Mishra et al., 2014); personal conversations; phone conversations; and, of course, web tools including intranet, blog, employees' applications, digital screens (Crescenzo, 2011); and communication via corporate social media channels (e.g., corporate application) (Ewing et al., 2019). All these channels and methods have been highly effective in employees' engagement and positive employees' feelings.

Despite the significance that the literature attributes to internal communication, there is less information regarding the role of line managers in leading internal communication among other communication processes that are managed. Hence, the significance of this study.

3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is the first part of a research on a doctoral level that aims to explore the connection between internal communication and employees' engagement. A

qualitative study was conducted among line managers and employees in order to investigate the processes involved in internal communication.

3.1 Aspects of Qualitative Research

As qualitative research methods examine the insights and meanings derived from empirical data, it seems appropriate to accomplish the aims of this study. Moreover, qualitative research facilitates the investigation of the sources and causes of a phenomenon or behavior through a methodical and in-depth analysis of the obtained qualitative information (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). One of the tools of qualitative research is conducting interviews through face-to-face conversations, through a web interface, or through small focus groups (Creswell, 2009). The researcher of this study conducted semi-structured interviews. The`interviews consisted of open questions that encouraged the participants to answer them, in order to find out their opinions about the processes involved in internal communication (Creswell, 2009).

3.2 The Research Population

The interviewees were 7 line-managers in organizations with over 150 employees and 7 employees who did not manage people. The organizations were from diverse fields, namely, high-tech, finance, industry, infrastructure, and healthcare. The employees were both male and female (3 male employees and managers and 3 female employees and managers). Their ages ranged between 27 and 60, and they fulfilled varied roles. The decision to include line managers was based on studies that found they were a driving force in leading employees in companies (Welch, 2011).

3.3 Sampling Method for Conducting In-Depth Interviews

The researcher of this study applied a convenience sample when choosing the research population for the interviews. In this sample, the participants are chosen from the population available to the researcher for the purpose of conducting the study (Creswell, 2009). Considering the diversified sample, namely employees and managers, the data presented varied opinions that would be examined quantitatively in the quantitative research phase. The interview guide was designed according to the guidelines recommended by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), and it is presented in Appendix 1.

Table 1: *The research design of the qualitative interviews presented in this article*

Qualitative Research aim	Research Design	Research population	Analysis method
To explore the processes that are involved in internal **communication** in companies.	Semi-structured interviews	7 Line Managers 7 Employees	Content analysis

3.4 Hypotheses

In light of the literature review, i.e., according to Men & Bowen (2017), communication dimensions refer to communication in the managerial-leadership top-down flow and bottom-up dialog; corporate communication that is transmitted by the professional communications unit of the organization; and communication between coworkers across the organization. And according to Erikson (cited in Forssberg & Malm, 2001), line managers play an important role of driving communication in units. Hence, the following two hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. In internal communication management, several processes are involved simultaneously.
2. Processes related to communication led by managers will receive a high weight among all the processes involved.

3.5 Building the Interview Guide - The questions

The interview guide should comprise targeted questions based on the theoretical background and an evolving dimension in light of the dialogue with the interviewees (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In this research, the guide consisted of questions based on theoretical background, concepts in the field, taxonomy and theories, facilitating an open dialogue (see Appendix 1).

3.6 Content Analysis Method

In this study, content analysis was performed based on collected information that was arranged in a way that allowed for interpretation of the information, for example, using questions such as "What was said?" (Shkedi, 2003). The performed analysis was a thematic analysis (Shkedi, 2003). In this framework, the information collected in the form of words and phrases was mapped into topics with shared meaning and

interpretation and from them, three themes of processes involved in internal communication were obtained.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

Creswell (2009) presents eight ways for attaining validity and reliability in qualitative research. One of them is External Audits, namely, inviting professionals to review the process and findings to ensure that the research was conducted properly. Thus, this research was validated by a qualitative analysis expert. The interview guide was validated by conducting a pilot of two interviews. Following the validation process, the interview guide was revised and adjusted, while the number of questions was adjusted, repeated questions were removed, and the questions suitability to their purpose was checked. Moreover, the completed questionnaire was backhand translated to ensure that the translation represents the questions asked in the original language.

3.8 Ethical Aspects

The research aim was explained to all the interviewees, and all seven managers and seven employees gave their informed consent to provide data. They were assured anonymity in publishing the information while protecting the information they provided. All interviewees agreed to be recorded or to be filmed during the ZOOM session.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Content Analysis of the Interviews

The data obtained from the interviews (7 managers and 7 employees) was content analyzed. The words, concepts, phrases, and sentences were grouped into three central themes that presented processes involved in internal communication in companies:

- Managerial communication skills
- Managing corporate communication
- Managing types of channels and methods of communication

Each theme comprised several categories that reflected it, based on the spirit of the interviews and comprehension of the topic. Table 2 depicts the themes and categories that emerged from the content analysis.

Table 2: *Themes and related categories*

Themes	**Category**	**Evidence**
Managerial Communication Skills	Interpersonal communication	*"Walk around among the people. Talk to them"* *"I feel that I lack personal communication with my manager"*
	Sharing	*"Involves me in tasks, goals, processes"*
	Listening	*"Be attentive to what is said and to feelings"*
	Encouragement and performance	*"Clarifies the tasks for them"*
Managing Corporate Communication	To update cross-cutting issues	*"Shares topics related to the organization as well as general topics"*
	Waterfall (top-down) and Listening (bottom up)	*"I'm passing this on to my employees".*
Managing Types of Channels and Methods of Communication	Valuable to employees	*"Employees want to participate and to know"*
	Customized communication for individuals and groups	*"We have a weekly one-on-one meeting and we also have company meetings"*
	Combination of personal & digital communication	*"We meet both one-on-one and in TEAMS".*
	Mix of communication channels	*"Messages also go through the organizational portal, video news, email, and personal meetings".*
	Managing communication routine	"*We have regular routines in our calendar as: a weekly personal meeting"*

The content analysis yielded the categories obtained from the interviewees' statements that reinforced the theme and were part of the processes that took place in managing internal communication:

Theme 1: Managerial communication skills

1. Category: **interpersonal communication** – this is part of the theme since communication occurs also through a manager-employee dialogue. This was attested by the words of a manager: *"Walk around among the people. Talk to them"*.
2. Category: **Sharing** – this is part of the theme since managers share information. Evidence of this emerged, also, in the words of an employee*: "Involves me in tasks, goals, processes"*.
3. Category**: Listening** – this is part of the theme since communication also involves a dialogue. Evidence of this emerged, also, in the words of an employee: "*Be attentive to what is said and to feelings".*
4. Category: **Encouragement and performance** - this is part of the theme since the findings show that managers motivate performance. This was attested by the words of a manager: "*Clarifies the tasks for them*".

Theme 2: Managing corporate communication –

The content analysis gave rise to the categories that emerged from the interviewees' statements. These statements reinforced the theme and were part of the processes that took place in internal communication management:

1. Category: **Update of cross-cutting issues** – this is part of the theme, since in the management of internal communication, organizational content that is relevant to all employees is also discussed. This was evidenced in the words of a manager: *"Shares topics related to the organization as well as general topics"*
2. Category: **Waterfall (top-down) and Listening (bottom up**) – This is another part of the theme that combines information transfer and listening. Evidence of this was expressed also in the words of a manager: *"I'm passing this on to my employees".*

Theme 3: Managing types of channels and methods of communication

The content analysis yielded the categories that emerged from the interviewees' statements, reinforcing the theme and being part of the processes that took place in managing internal communication:

1. Category: **Valuable to employees** – This is part of the theme since communication channels allow employees, among other things, to conduct a dialogue and be partners. Evidence of this was also manifested by the words of a manager: *"Employees want to participate and to know"*
2. Category: **Customized communication for individuals and groups -** This is part of the theme, since in the management of communication channels there is an adaptation of the channel according to the topics and the target audiences (whether it is an individual or a group). Evidence of this also emerged in the words of an employee: *"We have a weekly one-on-one meeting and we also have company meetings"*
3. Category: **Combination of personal & digital communication -** This is part of the theme since the communication channels include face-to-face communication, communication that goes through channels like SLACK, screens in the organization, and more. Evidence of this also emerged in the words of an employee: *"We meet both one-on-one and in TEAMS".*
4. Category: **Mix of communication channels -** This is part of the theme, since the management of communication channel types is based on a diversity of channels that emerged in the interviews and helped in the sharing and conducting of a dialogue. Evidence of this was also found in the words of an employee*: "Messages also go through the organizational portal, video news, email, and personal meetings".*
5. Category: **Managing communication routine -** This is part of the theme since the routine is expressed in methodological and repeated processes of communication at a defined frequency and through a defined channel. Evidence of this was also expressed in the words of a manager*: "We have regular routines in our calendar as: a weekly personal meeting"*

Furthermore, the findings highlighted line managers as a leading factor in the transmission of communication in the organization. During the interview, the interviewees were asked in what way they received communication and information in the organization. The answers showed that words related to line manager as a source of communication delivery (i.e.: line manager, line managers, my manager, my team leader) came up more than any other factor, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Frequency of occurrences of the ways in which interviewees receive information and internal communication

Ways by which interviewees receive internal communication	% and No of comments
Words that represent line manager	13 (%56.5)
Digital Channels	6 (%26)
Friends	1 (%4)
Union	1 (%4)
Meetings	2 (%8.6)

Table 3 illustrates that line managers are perceived as the leading source of communication to employees.

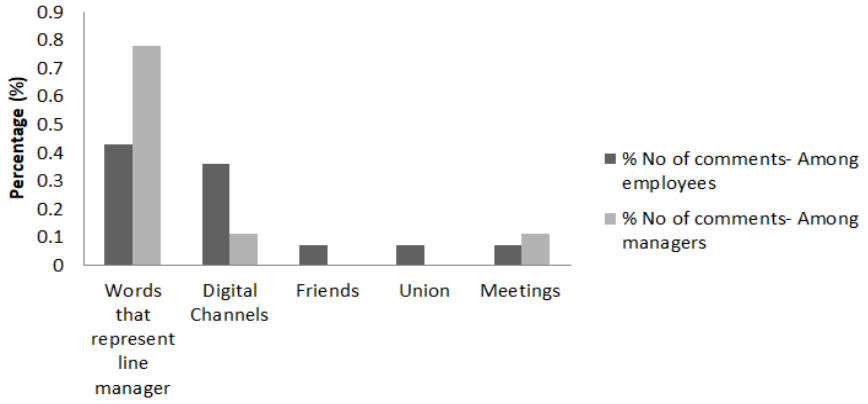


Figure 1: *Frequency of occurrences of the ways in which interviewees receive information and internal communication - Comparing employees and managers*

Figure 1 illustrates that the frequency of managers indicated as a source of message delivery in the organization is identical among line managers and employees**.**

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicated that both hypotheses were confirmed.

1. In internal communication management, several processes were involved simultaneously, as all the interviewees, both employees and managers, mentioned several processes, e.g., a manager who referred to managerial communication skills: "I clarify the tasks for them" and to managing corporate communication: "I share topics related to the organization."
2. Processes related to communication led by managers were attributed significant weight among all the processes involved, as the content analysis demonstrated that 56.5% of the interviewees used words that represented a line manager when describing the way they received internal communication.

The findings showed that in the interviews both managers and employees referred to the same themes that represented the processes involved in managing internal communication. Likewise, both managers and employees made the greatest number of references to the theme representing line managers' managerial communication skills in the delivery of internal communication.

The findings illustrated a distinction between managers and employees regarding the way they viewed digital channels as a source of internal communication: Employees attributed greater importance to digital channels as a way of receiving communication, with 35.8% of comments, compared to only 11% of managers' comments.

Furthermore, the findings of this study were in line with the current empirical literature, supporting the view that communication management involved managing several dimensions (Men & Bowen, 2017). These dimensions corresponded to the three themes that emerged in this study as reflecting processes in internal communication, namely managerial communication skills, corporate communication management, and the management of various communication channels and methods. Moreover, both the empirical literature and this study indicated that communication led by line managers was one of the processes involved in internal communication (Timm & Peterson, 2000).

Another aspect concerns the role of corporate communication as part of the communication processes within the organization (Hume & Leonard, 2014). Accordingly, this study also shows that processes of corporate communication are involved in internal communication, as well as in promoting two-way communication for message transmission and employee engagement through listening.

An additional aspect that emerged in this study, in line with information from the literature, refers to the fact that the management of internal communication also includes the management of a diverse mix of communication channels, such as face-to-face communication (Mishra et al., 2014).

Both the empirical literature and the findings of this study indicate that line managers require managerial communication skills to effectively deliver

communication. Moreover, these skills emerged as a strong need even among employees whose units lacked communication led by managers.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative study, which was based on interviews with 7 managers and 7 employees, shows that internal communication management involves the management of several processes simultaneously and can be divided into 3 themes: managerial communication skills, managing corporate communication, and managing types of channels and methods. These processes include managing multiple categories in order to maintain an orderly communication based on dialogue, message transmission, and listening. One of the processes that came up as a central process in delivering communication is communication led by line managers. This is based on managerial communication skills, which include the managers' ability to manage interpersonal communication, share, listen, encourage, and motivate employees to act.

This modest study that is based on semi-structured interviews, offers an opportunity for further research that examines managerial communication skills in depth. This may help in the guidance of managers, training them to manage communication effectively.

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APPENDIX 1 - The Interview guide

The interview guide for employees

Stage 1:

The processes that are involved in internal communication led by line managers, in companies.

Demographic information:

1. Can you please tell me a little about yourself?
1.1. Gender
1.2. What is your age - in decades?
1.3. Role
1.4. Personnel manager / non-employee manager
1.5. Education
1.6. What type of organization do you work for? (Finance, high-tech, industry..)
1.7. Your seniority in the organization
1.8. How many employees are there in the organization where you work?
1.9. How many employees are there in your unit?
1.10. Is your manager experienced or new in the job?
1.11. What is your manager's gender?
2. Can you describe how communication / organizational information, is carried out in your organization (i.e., through the portal, screens, organization mail, Slack, from your CEO's letters, from your line manager, through the employees' union)?
3. How do you mainly get the organizational information?

4. Do you feel that you need more organizational information, in order to know what is going on in the organization and to feel part of? Can you give me an example of topics.
5. What topics of communication do you get from your line manager? (missions, feedback, organizational things like: cross projects, employees' events, others)
6. Can you give me an example of topics that your line manager shares with you when he/she refers to the organization (i.e., vision, strategy, new products)
7. What communication channels does your manager use to communicate information to you personally? (personal conversations, mail, messages)
8. What communication channels does your manager use to communicate information to the entire unit? (Team meetings, WhatsApp, Slack, emails, telephone, in the cafeteria)
9. What routines does your line manager have in order to shares information about the organization? The division? The unit?
10. Can you give me an example for good communication with your line manager that makes you understand organizational subjects, and feel connect?

The interview guide for line managers in organizations

Stage 1:

The processes that are involved in internal communication led by line managers, in companies.

Demographic information:

1. Can you please tell me a little about yourself?
1.1. Gender
1.2. What is your age - in decades?
1.3. Role
1.4. Personnel manager / non-employee manager
1.5. Education: high school / bachelor's degree / master's degree / other
1.6. What type of organization do you work for? (Finance, high-tech, industry..)
1.7. Your seniority in the organization
1.8. How many employees are there in the organization where you work?
1.9. How many employees are there in your unit?
1.10. Are you an experienced manager or a new one?
2. Can you describe how communication / organizational information, is carried out in your organization (i.e.,: through the portal, screens, organization mail, Slack, from your CEO's letters, from your line manager, through the employees' union)?
3. How do you mainly get the organizational information?
4. Do you feel that you need more organizational information, in order to know what is going on in the organization and to feel part of? Give me an example please.
5. What topics of communication do you, as a line manager, share with your subordinate? (missions, feedback, organizational things like

6. What communication channels do you use, as a line manager, to communicate personally to each of your subordinate? (personal conversations, mail, messages).
7. What communication channels do you use, as a line manager, to communicate information to the entire unit? (Team meetings, WhatsApp, Slack, emails, in the cafeteria).
8. Can you describe your routines in order to share information about the organization?
9. Can you give a tip for new line manager – what steps and routines a manager should take in order to create on going internal communication with his subordinates?