
Guest editorial: Internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic

Guest editorial

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Introduction

This special issue on internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic invited contributions from scholars of internal communication management, public relations, strategic communication, crisis communication and employee engagement, as well as from digital workplace and leadership studies, and other related fields and disciplines. Despite its importance to organisations, considerable gaps in internal communication theory remain and scholars have, in the past, called for wider research on its mandates, scope and focus (Welch and Jackson, 2007). In response, knowledge has evolved significantly in the past decade with a focus on leadership communication (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Men, 2014, 2015; Tourish, 2014), listening to employees (Krais *et al.*, 2021; Ruck *et al.*, 2017), the employee-organisation relationship (EOR) (Kim and Rhee, 2011; Lee and Kim, 2017; Men and Robinson, 2018), excellence (Men and Bowen, 2017; Men and Stacks, 2014), coworker communication (Dahmann and Heide, 2020), channels and satisfaction (Verčič and Špoljarić, 2020) and internal digital platforms (Cardon, 2020; Cardon *et al.*, 2018; Ewing *et al.*, 2019; Madsen, 2016). Despite this, internal communication remains a relatively fragmented and under-researched field – especially in relation to internal crisis communication (ICC) (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Heide and Simonsson, 2014).

Exploring internal communication during a pandemic, first, provides a rare opportunity to deepen our knowledge of ICC. Second, the special edition extends our understanding of internal communication more generally – many of the concepts and principles discussed can be applied to transform ongoing practice to a more strategic level where it is given as much attention and resources as other more established functions inside organisations. Third, it provides an opportune moment to step back and propose potential directions for theory and practice in a post-pandemic world.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on organisations and employees

Although COVID-19 has not been a crisis for every organisation, for many it spurred significant changes which had a substantial and immediate impact on employees. Organisations had to find new ways of leading, organising and communicating when employees were told to adopt social distancing at work or work from home. Some had to quickly deliver new products and services or fundamentally change the way that they served customers. Others had to furlough employees or make them redundant at short notice. In a large number of organisations, the pandemic therefore involved dramatically unexpected situations with high levels of complexity and ambiguity. As Heide and Simonsson (2021) note in their paper in this special issue, the American organisational psychologist Karl E. Weick describes such situations as cosmological episodes when nothing makes sense. It is a

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situation that feels like *vu jaded*: “I’ve never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me”. In such circumstances, employees naturally seek information, reassurance and support from their employer and this is, of course, why internal communication is so important.

Internal crisis communication (ICC)

The focus of the papers in this special edition is ICC in the early stages of the pandemic, not as organisations emerge from the crisis. As authors in the special edition highlight, the crisis communication literature has focused almost exclusively on external aspects of a crisis and external communication during a crisis (e.g. [Frandsen and Johansen, 2011](#); [Strandberg and Vigso, 2016](#); [Heide and Simonsson, 2014, 2015](#)). The role of internal communication was largely ignored until 2010 when publications on ICC appeared ([Taylor, 2010](#); [Frandsen and Johansen, 2011](#); [Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2011](#)). According to [Frandsen and Johansen \(2011\)](#), ICC is different from external crisis communication because employees are both receivers and senders of crisis information and have stakes and expectations from their organisations. ICC can also be understood as a merger of crisis communication and change communication ([Heide and Simonsson, 2019](#)) as these fields focus on highly complex situations where stakeholders and coworkers experience ambiguity and confusion. In both cases, there is a need for information, communication and sensemaking in order to understand the situation and act accordingly. In addition, badly handled ICC can turn the initial crisis into a double crisis, negatively impacting organisational trust ([Frandsen and Johansen, 2017](#)).

[Ecklebe and Löffler \(2021\)](#), in this special edition, argue that the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be characterised by the attribution of crisis responsibility (whereby crisis managers adapt strategic crisis responses to the degree of crisis responsibility and the threat to reputation posed by a crisis ([Coombs, 2007](#))). Instead, it should be understood as a very specific type of crisis on a societal level – characterised by its global, public aspect, its unprecedented nature and the domino effect it has unleashed on various types of organisations worldwide ([Bailey and Breslin, 2021](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health crisis on a societal level that forces organisations to adapt their work processes and that has an enormous impact on the individual as an employee ([Li et al., 2021](#)).

Finally, [Tam et al. \(2021\)](#) point out in their paper in this special edition that the COVID-19 pandemic presents unique characteristics which warrant further investigation into examining employees as strategic publics. COVID-19 is an external, uncontrollable crisis in which organisations are victims. Despite this, most employees cast doubts over their leaders’ capabilities to manage the situation ([Syed, 2020](#)) and a perceived organisational control over the situation (or the lack of it), therefore, presents a reputational threat.

Overviews of articles in the special issue

An overview of each of the six articles in this special edition is provided in [Table 1](#), listed in alphabetical order by lead researcher.

Four articles are based on research in Europe (Austria, Germany, the UK and Sweden) and two are based on research in the US. Three articles adopt a quantitative method based on a survey with employees, one is a case study, one is based on in-depth interviews with communication management professionals and one adopts rhetorical discourse analysis of emails sent to employees. This range of approaches and contexts provides a broad background to the discussions of theory and practice. Although the articles are all grounded in ICC and extend existing knowledge (as discussed above), many also diverge into other areas. They take well-established concepts, such as social exchange theory, sensemaking,

| Article | Key concepts | Research design | Findings |
|--|---|---|--|
| Yeomans and Bowman: Internal crisis communication and the social construction of emotion: university leaders' sensegiving discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic | Sensemaking, emotion and sensegiving | Rhetorical discourse analysis of emails sent to staff | Three core narratives: organisational competence and resilience; empathy, reassurance and recognition; and community and location |
| Ecklebe and Löffler: A question of quality: perceptions of internal communication during the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany | Quality, employees' needs, ICC and the EOR | A survey with employees and structural equation modelling | The frequency of communication at the beginning and during the pandemic, substantial information, participative communication and a clear rejection of secrecy as antecedents for the EOR |
| Einweller, Ruppel and Stranzl: Achieving employee support during the COVID-19 pandemic – the role of relational and informational crisis communication in Austrian organisations | Social exchange theory, informational and relational internal communication, cognitive and affective responses and job engagement | A survey with employees and structural equation modelling | Informational and relational communication as have a significant but distinct influence on how employees support their employer during the crisis |
| Heide and Simonsson: What was that all about? On internal crisis communication and communicative coworkership during a pandemic | Managerialistic and process approaches to ICC, leadership, sensemaking and the role of coworkers | Qualitative case study, including internal document analysis and semi-structured interviews | Internal documents and texts tend to espouse a process approach, while practice tends to be grounded in a managerialistic approach |
| Neill and Bowen: Ethical listening to employees during a pandemic: new approaches, barriers and lessons | Organisational listening, trust and EOR theory | Thirty in-depth interviews with communication management professionals | Trust can be enhanced through building relationships with employees, ethical listening and closing the feedback loop by communicating how employers are using the feedback received by employees to make a positive change |
| Chan, Tam and Kim: Effects of organisational conflict history and employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 on negative megaphoning and turnover intention | Organisational conflict history, inactive/active publics, negative megaphoning and turnover intention | A survey with employees and bivariate and multiple regression analysis | Organisational conflict history (i.e. highly conflict-prone vs less conflict-prone workplaces) interacts with employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 (i.e. inactive vs active publics) in affecting employees' negative megaphoning and turnover intention towards their organisations |

Table 1.
Overview of the six
articles in this special
edition

organisational listening, the EOR and job engagement and re-evaluate them in the context of a crisis.

The articles illustrate the ways that organisations had to react quickly in a period of considerable uncertainty. The core themes highlighted (and which sometimes cross over between articles) are: sensemaking and sensegiving narratives (and antenarratives), empathy, benevolence, reassurance, transparency, reciprocity, social resources (information, status and love), leadership communication, listening (and pseudolistening), long-term relationship management, employee advocacy and negative megaphoning.

Summaries of the articles in the special issue

The first study in this special issue adopts a social constructionist, sensemaking approach centred on meaning-making discourse. Using rhetorical discourse analysis (RDA), [Bowman and Yeomans \(2021\)](#) reviewed emails sent to staff during a three-month period at the start of the pandemic. The analysis shows how leaders in two universities in the UK helped employees make sense of changing realities. The authors address a gap in the existing literature by using the lens of emotion to explore leadership sensegiving discourse in crisis situations and to extend understanding of sensegiving as future-orientated sensemaking. Three core narratives were identified: competence and resilience; empathy, reassurance and recognition; and community and location. Emotion is visible where narratives show concern with the well-being of employees in different spaces and timeframes, recognise the anxiety and apprehension in using technology and the challenges of working from home and re-imagine a fractured community as united around place. Finally, the authors stress that the antenarrative of uncertainty and speculation requires sense to be continuously “re-made” or re-framed as events unfold, reflecting a messy, non-linear, process view of reality. Ultimately, this point can, perhaps, be extended beyond a crisis situation as change and uncertainty persist in a post-pandemic world.

The second study incorporates a survey with 934 employees working at different types of organisations in Germany. [Ecklebe and Löffler \(2021\)](#) focus on two factors; the frequency of communication provided at the start of a crisis and the transparency of communication (substantial information, participation and accountability). The findings indicate that substantial information and the frequency of communication are of central importance to the perception of high-quality internal crisis communication. This indicates that employees’ need for information is high during – and especially at the beginning of – a crisis situation. Employees want to be able to understand the crisis situation as early as possible and are therefore on a constant hunt for relevant information. When ICC addresses this need, the perception of quality is likely to increase. The results also show that a positive perception of internal communication during a crisis has a significant positive effect on the three key dimensions of EOR: perceived trustworthiness, commitment and satisfaction. However, two factors did not have the expected associations with quality of communication: participative communication and accountability. The authors conclude that this may possibly be explained by the majority of employees being under immense cognitive strain and therefore wanting to receive information rather than be integrated into the internal communication as active participants. Furthermore, accountability (for example, providing a complete picture) for the information provided was seemingly not a priority for the employees. In summary, this study underlines the importance of frequency and informational transparency of communication at the start of a crisis and highlights the ways that some other established factors such as participative communication and accountability may be less important at the very early stages of a crisis.

The third article incorporates a survey with 1,033 employees who were employed full time with an Austrian organisation that had a minimum of 10 employees. [Einweller et al. \(2021\)](#)

ground their study in social exchange theory, where relationships are based on reciprocity. The authors posit that to receive cognitive, emotional and physical support from employees during the pandemic, management need to provide support to employees. This can be done by listening and responding to employees' concerns and needs and by acknowledging and thanking them for their efforts. The study discusses three specific social resources: information (advice, opinions, instruction and enlightenment), status (an expression of evaluative judgement conveying regard or esteem) and love (an expression of affectionate regard, warmth or comfort). The results highlight a positive relationship between satisfaction with factual and substantial information and employees' acceptance of managerial decisions. Acceptance was positively affected by communicated appreciation but not by participation. The authors conclude that an informational communication strategy, which includes not only instructional information but also information about the effects of the crisis on the organisation and employees' work situation, is important during the acute phase of the crisis as it significantly fosters employees' acceptance of managerial decisions. Importantly, the information also needs to be substantial (i.e. relevant, timely, complete, understandable, accurate and reliable). Finally, the study points out that while informational crisis communication leads to cognitive responses, it does not enhance employees' affective organisational commitment directly. Strengthening the emotional bond with employees requires relational communication and in the context of a pandemic, expressing appreciation may be even more important than participation. This study echoes some of the findings reported by [Ecklebe and Löffler \(2021\)](#) about participation and emotion (showing concern for well-being) highlighted by [Bowman and Yeomans \(2021\)](#). In addition, it introduces the concept of love in internal communication (as defined above) which is worthy of further research in the field.

Like the first study, the fourth article also takes a social constructivist and sensemaking approach. It is based on a qualitative case study of a national crisis authority accountable for emergency and crisis management and civil defence. The empirical material consists of internal documents and 17 semi-structured interviews. [Heide and Simonsson \(2021\)](#) focus the paper on discrepancies between knowledge (what is known), rhetoric (what is said) and practice (what is done) inside an organisation in a crisis. They make a distinction between a managerialistic approach (that adopts a systemic logic based on a belief that all organisations can be optimized using generic management skills) and a process approach (where organisations are in an ever-continuing process of organising). The authors highlight the role of coworkers in a crisis; they implement management decisions and contribute to handling the crisis. However, they are also active sensemakers and they may sometimes reject or reinterpret the intended meaning of leadership or management communication. In addition, coworkers have an important role as an ambassador during a crisis, and the authors, therefore, highlight the importance of internal communication that builds trust and identification with the organisation. The authors report that internal communication was not part of the organisation's crisis preparedness plans, which especially in the beginning of the crisis, was reflected in a negligible focus on internal communication. Two strands of discrepancies were identified in the case study organisation. First, coworkers are treated as passive receivers of information, but externally they are expected to act as active communicators. Second, managers tended to deal with ambiguity by providing more information rather than by initiating and facilitating conversations where they listen to coworkers. This article highlights the difficulty that an organisation that exists to manage emergency situations has in dealing with internal ambiguity – and the challenges involved in moving from a managerialistic to a process approach to internal crisis communication.

The fifth article is based on a qualitative research design that incorporates thirty in-depth interviews with US communication management professionals. [Neill and Bowen \(2021\)](#) examine an under-researched topic – organisational listening – and the role of listening in

internal communication. The study explores new challenges to listening presented by the pandemic and how organisations are overcoming them. The authors draw on the broad organisational listening literature and in applying this to internal communication make connections with trust and EOR. They report that as organisations have been forced to rely more on videoconferencing, they have had to be more deliberate in their efforts to listen and observe nonverbal cues. Some participants reported using more frequent pulse surveys to hear employee concerns during the pandemic. Others are looking to amend focus groups and forums as means for listening. Two essential points were identified in the study: trust and a desire among senior leadership to sincerely listen to employees. The authors also highlight the ethical responsibilities that organisations have towards their employees in a crisis. They argue that listening is inherent in fulfilling the role of an ethical conscience, requiring moral autonomy listening, dignity and respect for employees, and objectivity in moral deliberation. In addition, the authors note that listening can provide the emotional support and help to identify the resources that employees need during challenging times. This article starts to plug a gap in internal crisis communication theory in that it raises the way that listening to employees can be adopted to provide emotional support. It also extends the importance of empathy and support that have been highlighted in other articles in the special edition.

The final, sixth article, is based on a survey with 476 employees in the US that explores the interaction effects of organisational conflict history and employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 on negative megaphoning and turnover intention. [Tam et al. \(2021\)](#) point out that COVID-19 is an unprecedented crisis, and therefore, employees would not be able to refer to similar crises in the past as a reference point. They argue that organisational conflict history is, instead, relevant as a generic construct – this is based on the recollection of the frequency of internal conflicts (e.g. workplace harassment, discrimination and leadership scandals) and external conflicts (e.g. consumer complaints, lawsuits and negative media coverage). The authors suggest that employees who have heightened situational perceptions about COVID-19 might be more aware of and more concerned about how their organisations handle COVID-19 as an internal problem. These situational perceptions were measured using three variables: problem recognition, involvement recognition and constraint recognition. These are then further explored in relation to negative megaphoning (employees' negative external communicative behaviours about their organisation) and turnover intention. While it is expected that employees in highly conflict-prone workplaces would report higher negative megaphoning and turnover intention, the authors found that situational perceptions of COVID-19 would further exacerbate the effects. This finding reflects the importance of managing organisational conflicts continuously and pre-emptively while also cultivating relationships with employees based on their situational perceptions of issues and crises. It also highlights the value of ongoing symmetrical internal communication that strengthens EOR.

In summary, the six articles in the special edition raise a number of important points for theory and practice. First, there is an emphasis on emotional support in many of the studies. This is related to how organisations listen and respond to employees, and how they demonstrate their appreciation for what employees do to support the organisation in a crisis. Second, a crisis serves to highlight ambiguities that need to be embraced and understood as ongoing processes of organisational life which require a renewed remit for internal communication based more on conversation and regular re-framing than concrete narratives that are simply transmitted to employees. Third, internal crisis communication may require different strategies at different stages – participation appears not to be so important at the beginning of the event. Fourth, segmenting employee groups, for example by situational perceptions, may be a useful way to improve communication effectiveness. Finally, although only raised in one paper, the question of ethical internal communication requires further examination.

A research agenda for internal communication in post-pandemic times

Guest editorial

Learning from a crisis includes building on internal communication practices that were used and developing findings from the research conducted. The following potential future research topics flow from the special edition:

Emotions and internal communication

Employees are creatures of emotions, and their emotional reactions are more prevalent in turbulent times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. How can internal communication help employees cope with negative emotions such as anger, sadness and fear and harness the power of positive emotions in the workplace, such as companionate love, joy, pride and gratitude? How can organisations and leaders communicate to nurture a positive emotional culture? Empathy and gratitude have emerged as consistent themes of internal communication during the pandemic. Yet, neither of these concepts have been fully explored pre- or during the pandemic. How can we communicate warmth, affectionate regard, care, support and reassurance? What are effective and creative approaches in expressing employer appreciation, thanks and recognition to employees? And, how does the organisation's empathetic and appreciative communication affect employee outcomes such as trust, commitment, work engagement and organisational effectiveness? All these questions deserve more scholarly attention moving forward.

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Internal organizational listening

Traditional internal communication practices focused more on corporate speak rather than listening. As a result, dialogue and two-way conversations are often missing. Scholars have discussed the innate connections between organisational listening and important theoretical concepts of symmetrical communication, dialogue and engagement in the public relations literature (e.g. [Macnamara, 2016](#); [Ruck, 2021](#)). However, despite the importance of the function of internal listening, this concept has not been systematically and wholistically examined. Neill and Bowen's article in this special issue takes an important step in addressing internal listening in crisis times. Yet, numerous issues are in need of further scholarly investigation, for instance, levels of internal listening (e.g. listening by CEOs, supervisors and corporate communication teams), methods/channels of internal listening, using emerging technologies such as big data analytics and AI-enabled chatbots in "smart" listening, processes and systems of internal listening, impact of internal listening on employee trust, empowerment, well-being and its association with a culture of openness, transparency and supportiveness in the organisation.

Redefine excellence in internal communication

What does "excellence" look like in internal communication? Organisations continue to evolve to adjust to the fast-changing business environment shaped by political, economic, social and technological forces. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a reset button for many organisations to rethink their management and communication philosophies. As internal communication transforms from a necessary organisational function to a critical organisational priority during the pandemic ([Grates, 2020](#)), how it can be done effectively also evolves. While the excellence principle of symmetrical communication and dialogue demonstrated their explanatory power in the internal context (e.g. [Kang and Sung, 2017](#); [Men, 2014](#)), scholars may want to further explore what defines excellence in internal communication in the post-pandemic era, taking into consideration of best practices emerged during the pandemic, featured by transparency, authenticity, humility, empathy, gratitude and optimism/positivity.

Engaging remote workers in the technology enabled workplace

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed many organisations to be more open to remote work. Recent research has showed that over half Americans who can do their jobs at home want to continue after the pandemic (Gritzo, 2021). While communicating and engaging remote employees is not a new research topic, with the transformation of the workplace in the post-pandemic era and employee demands of more flexibility, internal communication scholars and practitioners need to continue exploring creative ways and mechanisms to engage the remote workforce. Corporate and leadership communication and listening, employee collaboration and culture building may take new forms in an electronic-based communication environment. How would this, if at all, affect employee identification, connection, satisfaction and engagement within the organisation, innovation and ultimately their job performance and organizational bottom line? Relatedly, how will internal communication practices and measurement evolve in the digital space shaped by emerging technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence)? These current issues will require more future scholarly attention.

Segmenting employee publics

Not all employees are similar (Men and Bowen, 2017). Traditional audience segmenting approaches (e.g. based on demographic, psychographic and behavioural factors) have been applied to employee segmentation. Tam, Kim and Chon's article in this special issue suggests the utility of the situational factors (i.e. problem recognition, constraint recognition and level of involvement) from the situational theory of publics and situational theory of problem-solving in segmenting employees, especially around internal issues and problems. Given the importance of understanding publics and audiences in all communications and complexity of workforce composition (multi-generational, diversity, difference in needs between frontline vs in-office workers, onsite vs remote workers), future researchers should explore more applicable and practical methods of employee segmentation.

Ethical internal communication

Socially responsive organisations put their customers, employees and the community first. Internally, how employees are treated by the organization, whether due diligence is done to the ethics of care, whether dignity and respect are paid to employees, whether diversity and inclusion is valued and whether employee wellness and mental health issues are openly discussed, are just a few examples that can demonstrate the organisation's social conscience and how they gain their social licence to operate. Despite the long conversations about ethics in public relations, ethics in internal communication has been under researched (Ruck, 2022). Especially with the millennial and Gen-Z generations dominating the workplace, who put stronger emphasis on the ethical behaviours and social responsibility of employers (Men and Bowen, 2017), scholars need to explore further the role of internal communication in constructing virtues and values and in ethical treatment of employees.

Among these topics, in particular, focussing on emotional communication and listening significantly broadens the scope and remit of internal communication beyond a channel focused, transmission-oriented function, especially given recent scholarship has increasingly recognized internal communication as a process of co-creation of meaning, value and relationships (Men and Bowen, 2017; Welch and Jackson, 2007). An employee-entered approach and alternative paradigms (e.g. rhetorical, critical) beyond the dominant management perspective in studying internal communication is called for. As internal communication continues to evolve as one of the fastest growing specializations in public relations and communication management, the development of a more sophisticated body of

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