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Research Report

Keeping up the spirit. Internal communication in an increasingly virtual work environment

Communication Insights, No. 13

Provided in Cooperation with:

Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication – An initiative of the Günter Thiele Foundation, Leipzig

Suggested Citation: Stranzl, Julia; Wolfgruber, Daniel; Einwiller, Sabine; Brockhaus, Jana (2021) : Keeping up the spirit. Internal communication in an increasingly virtual work environment, Communication Insights, No. 13, Academic Society for Management & Communication, Leipzig

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/247712>

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COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS

KEEPING UP THE SPIRIT

Internal communication in an
increasingly virtual work environment



ACADEMIC SOCIETY
FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

An initiative of the Günter Thiele Foundation

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Authors and citation of this publication (APA style):

Stranzl, J., Wolfgruber, D., Einwiller, S., & Brockhaus, J. (2021). Keeping up the spirit. Internal communication in an increasingly virtual work environment (Communication Insights, Issue 13). Leipzig: Academic Society for Management & Communication. Available online at www.academic-society.net

Published by the Academic Society for Management & Communication – An initiative of the Günter Thiele Foundation

c/o Leipzig University, Nikolaistrasse 27–29,
04109 Leipzig, Germany

Email: info@akademische-gesellschaft.com

Website: www.academic-society.net

Proofreading by Chris Abbey

Photos and illustrations by Agnes Prammer (S. Einwiller, p. 3);
Adobe Stock: p. 6 (apinan), p. 16 (Azat Valeev), p. 19 (elenabsl),
p. 24 (josefmicic)

Layout and graphics by Zitronengrau Design

ISSN 2749-893X

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EDITORIAL



» A culture of flexibility will define the future of internal communication. «

Alongside the transformation of work environments during the COVID-19 pandemic, internal communication underwent a decisive switch towards more virtuality. This was especially demanding for organizations with a “culture of presence” owing to their limited experience of flexible working arrangements, social intranets, and virtual events. Although a change towards a “culture of flexibility” was long overdue, its speed created a multitude of challenges.

This issue of Communication Insights highlights the challenges faced by internal communication professionals due to the rapid change towards a more virtual or hybrid work environment, and explains how they can be addressed. It shows that some of the key goals of internal communication – such as employees’ commitment, engagement and participation – became even more important during this period of transformation. Yet they are harder to achieve in an environment characterized by greatly reduced personal contact. Within a short space of time, internal communication professionals have had to learn, innovate, implement new formats, and enable their colleagues in the organization to improve their own communication skills.

Our findings are based on a comprehensive research project studying the transformation of internal communication from different perspectives. My team, led by Julia Stranzl, and I held in-depth interviews

with 16 internal communication experts. To capture employees’ experiences, we also conducted a survey among another 1,000 workers, while our master’s students helped us to interview 60 people who worked from home, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. We would like to thank all our interviewees for their valuable insights and for devoting their time.

Virtual corporate communication was identified by the Communications Trend Radar 2021 (a research project by the Academic Society) as one of five trends likely to change corporate communication. This edition of Communication Insights enhances our understanding of this trend and how it plays out for corporate communications. If you’re interested in virtual communication with external stakeholders, I recommend Issue 12 of Communication Insights on virtual stakeholder dialogues.

Given that virtuality is here to stay and unlikely to lose any of its prominence, we hope that this report will be a source of inspiration regarding the role of internal communication.

Dr. Sabine Einwiller

Professor of Public Relations Research
University of Vienna, Austria

KEY FINDINGS

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN AN INCREASINGLY VIRTUAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen an upswing in the digitalization of the world of work and flexible work arrangements with far greater scope for telework. The result is a hybrid work environment with new challenges for operations and communication. Here is an overview of the key findings of our research project:

- ▶ **Challenges:** Organizations are facing a turbo-change to virtuality which is accompanied by several major challenges. Above all, **achieving the key goals** of internal communication such as commitment, engagement, and participation is harder in a work environment with reduced personal contact. Employees' specific needs and concerns need to be identified. And **new formats** that address and include everyone, including those working on-site, have to be developed. However, enabling employees and managers to become empowered communicators themselves is a challenge that can only be met in close collaboration with HR (pp. 6-9).
- ▶ **Goals:** Achieving the key goals of internal communication takes creativity and some novel approaches. To strengthen employees' **affective commitment** to the organization, relational communication is required. This can comprise appreciative and emotional messages, virtual events, and interactive formats with executives. Also, formats enhancing the recognition and visibility of employees are useful (p.12). Although stimulating **motivation** and **job engagement** is a core responsibility of executives and team-leaders, internal communication's role is to coach and enable them to achieve these goals (p. 13). Participation requires interactive communication measures on platforms where employees can like, share, and comment. Creative ideas that stimulate participation are needed (p. 11). As telework reduces employees' sense of cohesion, measures such as virtual leisure activities are required that foster the sense of togetherness (p. 10).
- ▶ **Risks:** An increase in virtuality also poses risks. Organizational culture is changing from a "culture of presence" to a "**culture of flexibility**". This has many advantages as employees can adapt their work schedule to their needs. However, more flexibility entails the risk of an "**always-on**" **mindset**, which can trigger **technostress**. This in turn leads to more occupational stress, and blurred boundaries between work and non-work domains. Ways to prevent psychological harm should be communicated in close cooperation with HR (pp. 16-17). More virtual work also creates the danger of a **two-class society**. Internal communications must help to foster an **inclusive communication culture** where all employees – whether working from home or on-site – feel equally appreciated and included. Measures like top management visits and digital channels that can be accessed by all employees are part of the solution (p. 18).
- ▶ **Future:** The survey findings show that most employees prefer **hybrid work**, i.e., working partly from home and partly on-site (p. 24). Thus, the future will be characterized by much more virtuality and the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic will remain important in the time to come. Above all, internal communication needs to think and act strategically as it exercises its role as an important player. Internal communicators aren't just a supplier of content and services, but they are a **business partner for management and HR**. It's important to listen to employees' concerns, to empower them to become effective communicators themselves. And to be bold when it comes to trying out new formats (p. 24).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was conducted by Sabine Einwiller and her team at the University of Vienna. It comprised four successive phases:

1 Literature review

The project started with a review of academic and practitioner-oriented literature on virtual internal communication and collaboration. The insights helped to shape the research questions and set up the interview guides. They were also used to develop theoretical models regarding the relationship between the relevant concepts.

2 Interviews with 16 communication experts

In-depth interviews with 16 internal communication experts from different German, Austrian and Swiss companies were conducted virtually in March and April 2021, approximately one year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. Some organizations had already been quite advanced with regards to virtual communication and collaboration before the pandemic, while others found themselves forced by coronavirus to change towards more flexibility and virtualization. The aims were to identify the challenges faced by internal communication experts in times of increasing virtuality, their key goals, and what communicators are doing to achieve them.

3 Interviews with 60 employees

60 employees working for Austrian or German organizations were interviewed in May and June 2021. All of them spent at least half their working hours working from home and were employed in an organization with at least 250 employees. The semi-structured interviews investigated the employees' experiences of the changes towards virtualization and flexibility as well as how they perceived the internal communication efforts by their organizations.

4 Survey of 1,000 employees

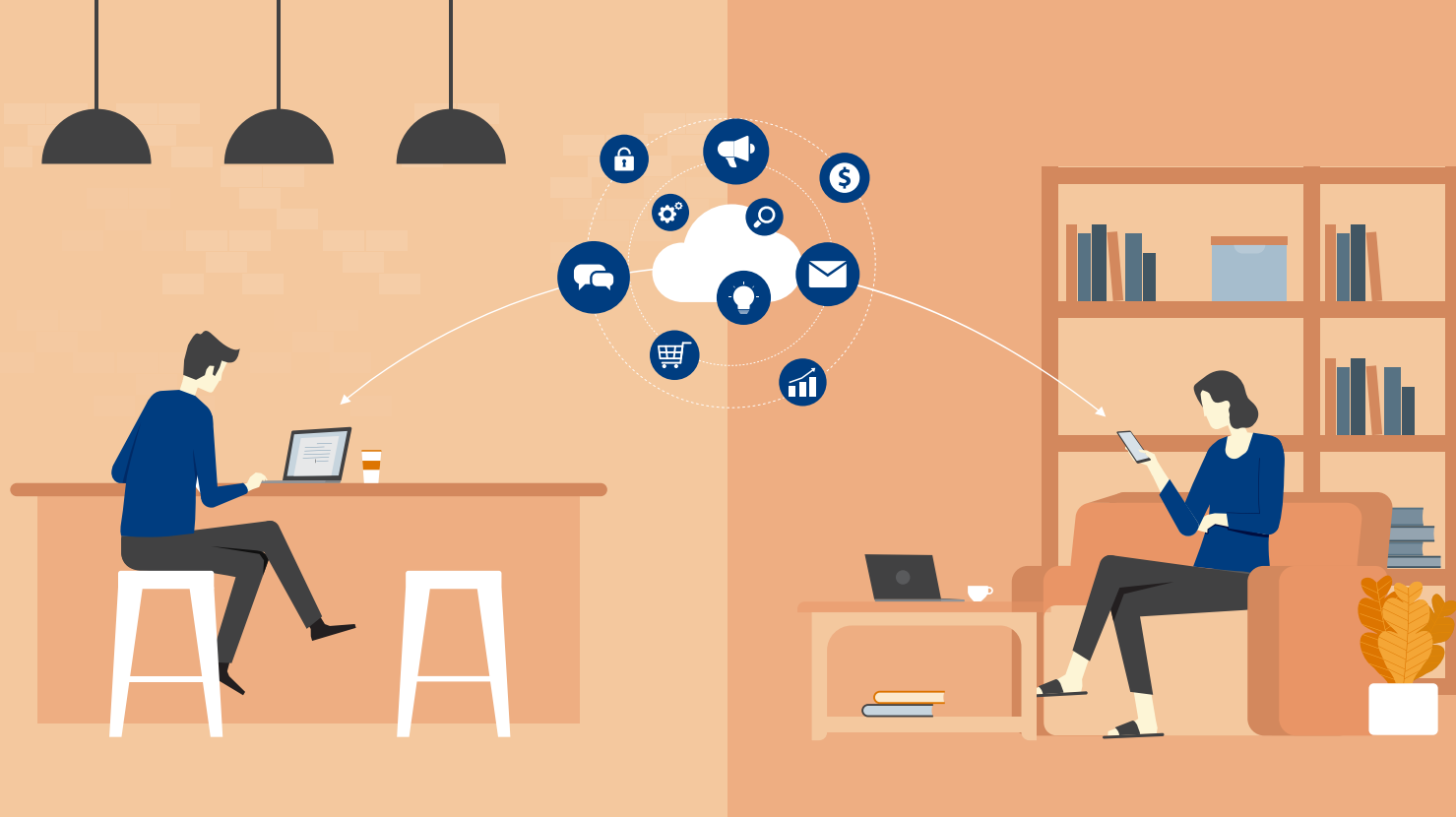
As a last step, two online surveys were conducted among people employed by Austrian or German organizations with at least 250 employees in August and September 2021. Participants were recruited by the market research firm Dynata.

- The participants in survey 1 (n = 600) worked remotely at least one day per week. Its goal was to investigate the perception of internal communication and its effects on an organizational level.
- Survey 2 (n = 400) addressed communication and collaboration in teams, and was carried out among people who worked remotely for at least 50 percent of the time.

Organizations participating in this study



Sixteen internal communication experts from these organizations were interviewed in March and April 2021. The goal was to find out about objectives, challenges and suitable communication measures in times of virtual internal communication.



TURBO-CHANGE TO VIRTUALITY

TEN CHALLENGES FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced organizations to shift much of their communication from reality to virtuality. Internal communication plays a vital role in managing and supporting the change process. This section explains the concepts of virtuality and hybrid work before highlighting ten major challenges for internal communication.

WHAT DOES VIRTUALITY AND HYBRID WORK MEAN?

The term “**virtual**” has become a buzzword in various contexts. In the world of work, virtuality is most often associated with two dimensions: (1) the geographic dispersion of team or organizational members and (2) reliance on technology and electronic media for collaborating and communicating. Virtuality is frequently conceptualized along a spectrum between computer-mediated and face-to-face interaction. Two more dimensions often complement the concept of virtuality: (3) a dynamic structure where actors frequently change roles and relationships and (4) national diversity (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006).

The digitalization of the world of work and the sharp rise in remote working (generally at home) due to the COVID-19 pandemic have drastically increased virtual collaboration and virtual communication in organizations. When employees work partly from home and partly in the office, the term “**hybrid work**” is often used. A hybrid work model usually involves more flexible work arrangements. In our study, the degree of virtuality and teleworking depended on both the phase of the pandemic and the economic sector or type of work.

10 MAJOR CHALLENGES FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATION PRACTITIONERS

Increasing virtuality leads to various challenges regarding communication with and between employees. Organizations with a pronounced “culture of presence” were especially challenged owing to their limited experience of flexible work arrangements and virtual communication formats. Based on the interviews with 16 internal communication experts, we identified ten major challenges for internal communication concerning the transition to a more virtual or hybrid work organization:



1. ENSURING TECHNOLOGICAL ACCESS AND SUPPORT

Employees need to have the necessary hardware and software. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this wasn't the case in many organizations. Accordingly, companies with a distinct “culture of presence” had to set up a digital infrastructure overnight. These organizations encountered problems when trying to help employees to communicate and interact in virtual space and to ultimately feel comfortable working with new software and applications.



2. CO-CREATING A VIRTUAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

Employees' level of knowledge about how work and communication can take place digitally and virtually varies from one person to the next. Many employees need to be taught how to use digital tools effectively. Providing the necessary support requires close collaboration between internal communication experts and colleagues from IT and HR to co-create a functioning virtual work environment.

» At the beginning of our virtual collaboration, we had different channels: The intranet, Microsoft Teams, and many other tools. It wasn't clear to our employees which service to use for what. Employee communications are intended to provide an overview of the available tools for virtual communication and generate an understanding so that employees really use them interactively. «

Daniela Winnicki, Head of Communications & Public Affairs, Science and Sustainability SEE, Bayer Austria



3. ACHIEVING THE GOALS OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

By means of internal communication, organizations pursue various goals: engendering and strengthening employees' affective commitment, job engagement and cohesion; stimulating employees to participate in internal communication processes and decision-making. Achieving these goals in an increasingly virtual work environment isn't easy. Therefore, communication professionals need to innovate and develop new ways to achieve their goals (pp. 10-14).



4. GAINING INSIGHTS INTO EMPLOYEES' NEEDS AND DIFFICULTIES

Internal communication professionals need extensive information about the workforce's needs, wants and difficulties arising from the changes. Thus, they can adjust their communication formats and messages accordingly. Listening as well as evaluating communication measures and employee feedback are pivotal for the improvement of communication and consequently the working climate.

» In this new normal, agility is very important. We have heard from many colleagues that they are stuck in virtual meetings all day and don't get any work done at all. «

Mandy Stauder, Manager of Internal Communication, VNG



5. EMPLOYEE-CENTRIC COMMUNICATION

Employees have to adjust to the new work environment and discover their style of working and communicating. The challenge is to identify and use the right communication channels to cascade information to every employee and reach the right internal target audience with the right messages at the right time while avoiding information overload.

» Our task is to communicate even more intensively so that we can ensure that the information reaches the last link in the chain without anything getting lost. «

Celine Zellweger, Corporate Communication Manager, Clariant



6. SUPPORTING LEADERS TO COMMUNICATE AUTHENTICALLY AND TRANSPARENTLY

An increasingly virtual work environment demands different leadership communication styles and skills. CEOs' and other top managers' communication efforts are the most effective when they are authentic, transparent, and adequately emotional. Long speeches and texts are being replaced by simple video statements and low-threshold online dialogue formats. During times of change, leaders are much more in the limelight. They are supposed to act as role models for employees and therefore need to represent the (new) digital mindset.

» Authenticity in communications might appear in different styles, yet it never suggests one knows it all. Because leaders are also vulnerable and should show it. If people notice that your story and messages aren't just empty talk but real, I'm convinced you'll create a cohesive picture – something which is highly appreciated and valued by people. «

Birgit Ziesche, Head of Global Internal Communications, Henkel



7. ENABLING EMPLOYEES AND EXECUTIVES TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

Operating in an increasingly virtual and flexible work environment requires a more self-reliant style of working and communicating. Together with their colleagues from HR, internal communication professionals act as facilitators. They not only enable employees and executives to use digital tools and applications effectively. They also empower them to communicate engagingly and effectively within their teams and units as well as with other organizational members.



8. LEARNING NEW SKILLS, INNOVATING AND BEING AGILE

In an increasingly virtual work environment, the demands on internal communication professionals have risen. Creating an effective and inclusive communication environment for all employees requires new skills and high levels of job engagement. Internal communicators need to innovate, learn new skills, take inspiration from employee feedback, and respond flexibly to the new challenges that arise.



9. MINIMIZING THE RISK OF A TWO-CLASS SOCIETY

As virtuality increases, there is a risk that employees who don't have an office job and need to work on-site (e.g., in production) will be excluded from the communication flow. This may create a two-class society within the organization (p. 18). Communication professionals need to be aware of this problem. They should develop an inclusive communication strategy that integrates all employees, regardless of whether they work at a computer from home or not.



10. SUPPORTING THE CHANGE TOWARDS A CULTURE OF FLEXIBILITY

Internal communication experts must work even more closely than before with colleagues from other units, especially HR and IT, in order to develop future forms of work and communication. Additionally, they must create awareness and provide support for the whole organization in its change towards a "culture of flexibility" (pp. 16-17). This is especially difficult in organizations with a strong "culture of presence."

THE GOALS OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION – ARE THEY CHANGING?

HOW TO ACHIEVE COHESION, PARTICIPATION, COMMITMENT, AND ENGAGEMENT

When communication and collaboration becomes more and more virtual, do the goals of internal communication need to be reconsidered? This chapter addresses cohesion, participation, affective commitment, and engagement as common goals of internal communication. We report what we have learned from expert interviews regarding the relevance of these goals, and what organizations are doing to achieve them. The conclusions are substantiated by findings from employee interviews and employee surveys.



COHESION

What is it?

Cohesion refers to the “extent to which employees within an organization feel a sense of unity with one another” (Ruga, 2014, p. V) and can vary from low to high. Perceived cohesion fulfills employees’ general need for belonging and inclusion.

Why is it important?

Perceived cohesion has a positive effect on employees’ organizational citizenship behavior (Ruga, 2014), which comprises all (voluntary) actions that are based on individual initiative and ultimately intended to benefit the organization and/or team (Bienstock et al., 2003). A cohesive work environment can also decrease turnover rates.

How do organizations foster cohesion?

- ✓ Virtual corporate events
- ✓ Virtual meet & eat, coffee talks, after-work drinks
- ✓ Virtual activities like yoga, debates, book club

What has changed?

Employees mention that their sense of cohesion with the organization is reduced by the solitary nature of teleworking and infrequent face-to-face interaction with colleagues. This is because working remotely creates not just a physical but also a psychological distance from the organization.

How can it be achieved?

Relationship-oriented, supportive, appreciative communication is crucial for creating a sense of community and cohesiveness. Internal communication experts report positive effects when messages put the “we” (i.e., a common identity) front and center. They also emphasize the role of virtual social events. However, it’s important to take cultural and regional differences into account.

- ✓ Chatroulette (randomly meeting colleagues online) and virtual blind dates
- ✓ Camera-on policy in virtual meetings
- ✓ Tips for managers on how to foster cohesion and team spirit



PARTICIPATION

What is it?

Employee participation encompasses the range of mechanisms used to involve the workforce in organizational processes and decisions at all levels of the organization and within teams (Wilkinson et al., 2010). In the context of internal communication, it means direct participation by means of interaction for example on internal social media.

Why is it important?

Previous research confirms that employees who are encouraged to participate in organizational processes and activities show more affective commitment (Einwiller et al., 2021). Moreover, employees who can actively participate in decision-making are more satisfied with their jobs and are less likely to suffer burnout (Atouba, 2021).

What has changed?

Participation is complicated when employees are physically remote. Some employees mention that they are afraid to voice something that's wrong or considered inappropriate when participating on virtual channels, which explains why some prefer to participate anonymously. To facilitate participation, internal communication must ensure that all employees have a similar degree of knowledge and equal opportunities to meaningfully raise their voice.

How can it be achieved?

Expert interviews confirm that participation requires implementing and cultivating two-way communication through the intranet and internal social media. Dialogic virtual formats, e.g., virtual townhall meetings, can equalize the communication hierarchy by encouraging employees to pose questions to their management and to propose ideas in the chat.

How do organizations foster participation?

- ✓ Intranet platform with liking, sharing, and commenting features
- ✓ Internal social media to share ideas as well as facilitate creativity and innovation
- ✓ Q&A sessions in townhall meetings
- ✓ Possibility to ask questions of the management on the intranet; the importance of questions is decided by colleagues via a voting system
- ✓ Promoting blog posts by employees on relevant topics
- ✓ Live webcasts with interaction options
- ✓ Video statements from the CEO with comment function
- ✓ Topic-based virtual workshops

» In internal communication we work very closely together with our global leadership team. We support open, trustful communication by offering dialogue in the respective areas of responsibility in terms of content and topic preparation as well as tools and formats. «

Birgit Ziesche, Head of Global Internal Communications, Henkel



AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT

What is it?

Affective commitment is an employee's individual emotional attachment to – and identification with – the organization. It represents the desire to remain a member of the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

Why is it important?

Extant research shows that committed employees are more likely to engage at work and are protected from job stressors (Einwiller et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2002).

What has changed?

Something that was relatively easy to achieve in times of low virtuality by means of employee events, hallway conversations, interdepartmental meetings, etc. has now become a challenge. Because telework means physical separation from colleagues and the organization, commitment is harder to achieve and maintain.

How can it be achieved?

The survey findings confirm that relational communication provides the socioemotional support that employees want. They wish for more information about the organization's goals and values, and for recognition of their work performance.

How do organizations foster commitment?

Virtual corporate events

- ✓ Virtual town hall meetings with Q&A, also with external speakers
- ✓ Virtual lunch & learn meetings
- ✓ Virtual topic-based initiatives (e.g., mental health programs, diversity days, Christmas parties)

Dialogue with executives

- ✓ Online dialogue formats with the management team (either exclusively for executives or for all employees)
- ✓ Questions and answers in Yammer
- ✓ Leadership team/CEO home stories, "At home with ..." (videos and podcasts)

Showing appreciation, and providing support

- ✓ Video messages "behind the scenes," selfie-style stories from employees
- ✓ Honoring achievements (e.g., through awards, online "live-high-five-presentations")
- ✓ Support with tools and teleworking in general

» Communication has changed. It's no longer just about pure information. It's also about interaction and dialogue to create understanding, motivate employees, and improve collaboration and processes. Employees participating in surveys regularly ask 'Why am I actually here? How can I contribute to the overall success of the company? What is the value to society of my work?'«

Nina Skrzyszowski, Senior Communication Manager, B. Braun



JOB ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

What is it?

Job engagement is the degree to which employees are attentive and absorbed in their role performance (Saks, 2006), i.e. how dedicated they are in doing their work. It comprises cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components like contributing ideas and unhesitatingly working overtime if needed. Engagement depends on the meaningfulness of the job, and the availability of work-relevant physical, psychological, and emotional resources (Kahn, 1990).

Why is it important?

It shows that engaged employees are generally more satisfied in their job, perform better, and are more likely to show extra-role behavior (Biswas & Bhatnagar, 2013; Saks & Gruman, 2014). They also tend to communicate positively about their organization and are less likely to quit their jobs (Kang & Sung, 2017; Shen & Jiang, 2019).

What has changed?

Internal communication experts consider fostering job engagement and motivation important goals. However, they see managers as mainly responsible for communicatively driving these two goals. That's why internal communicators are increasingly taking on the role of coaches, who enable managers on all hierarchical levels to meet the challenge of engendering employees' engagement and motivation.

How can it be achieved?

Internal communication professionals offer communication training designed to implement a trust-based leadership style and the improvement of the communication skills necessary to effectively communicate in the virtual or hybrid workplace. Close cooperation with HR is important to effectively fulfill this enabling role.

How do organizations foster job engagement and motivation?

- ✓ Leadership training sessions with the emphasis on employee communication (in cooperation with HR)
- ✓ Regular meetings with managers to discuss challenges and solutions
- ✓ Regular reminders to managers of the importance of engaged, motivated employees and tips how to foster them
- ✓ Employee surveys to gauge their needs and concerns

» Internal communications can set the path, but it's crucial that leaders make themselves available and are open to their co-workers' questions. Even so, my team and I in internal communications can only exert limited influence here. «

Nicole Weber, Head of Internal & Change Communications, ZF

RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION DRIVES COMMITMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

The findings of the survey among 600 employees indicate that **relational communication** exerts a very strong positive influence on employees' **commitment** to their organization. Relational communication comprises appreciative messages from management, asking for feedback, fostering participation and an open communication climate. Employees are invited to participate in relevant communication and decision-making processes. Commitment, in turn, has a strong positive impact on **job engagement**.

Thus, for internal communication appreciative, dialogue-oriented communication is key – because it strengthens the emotional bond between employees and their organization. And then, when employees are affectively committed to their organization, they are also more engaged in their job.

Commitment can be fostered through relational communication



0 = no correlation
1 = perfect correlation

Relational communication (e.g., appreciative messages from the management, asking for feedback) is crucial to engender commitment, which subsequently has a positive impact on job engagement.

» To maintain the emotional connection with the company, we communicate stories on our values and how we live and express them. We want everybody to be able to say, 'That's why I'm proud to work for Clariant.' «

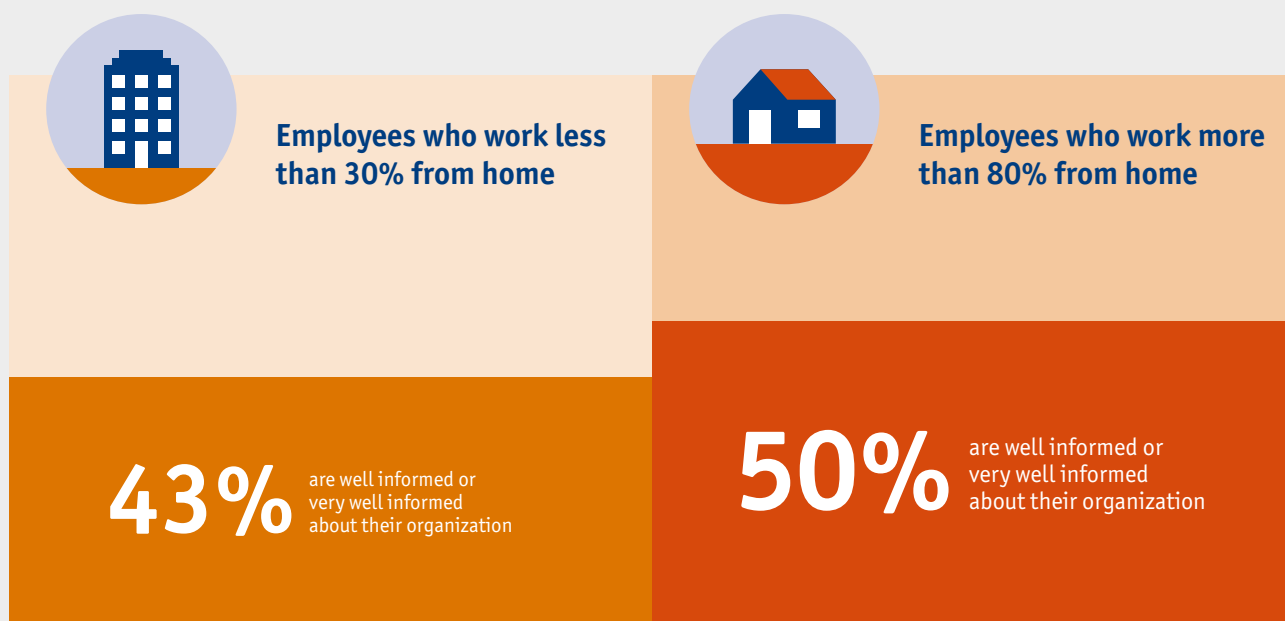
Celine Zellweger, Corporate Communication Manager, Clariant

How satisfied are employees with organizational information they receive?



The survey results show that people who work more than 80 percent from home are significantly more satisfied with the organizational information they receive than employees who work on-site at least two days per week.

How well informed are employees about their organization?



Those who work remotely know significantly more about what's going on in their organization. This indicates that the internal communication measures reach those working largely from home better than those, who (also) need to work on site. This points to the problem of the two-class society (p. 18) in that people who do not have a (permanent) computer workplace are less well addressed by internal communication than typical desk workers.



THE DANGERS OF AN INCREASINGLY VIRTUAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON PERCEIVED STRESS LEVELS AND THE SENSE OF INCLUSION

Virtualization usually leads to more flexibility for those who can work from home. This has many advantages, but also poses risks when the boundaries between work and private life become blurred. Being able to work from home may also deepen the divide between those who can and those who can't (because their job requires them to be on-site). This chapter sheds light on some negative aspects of virtualization.

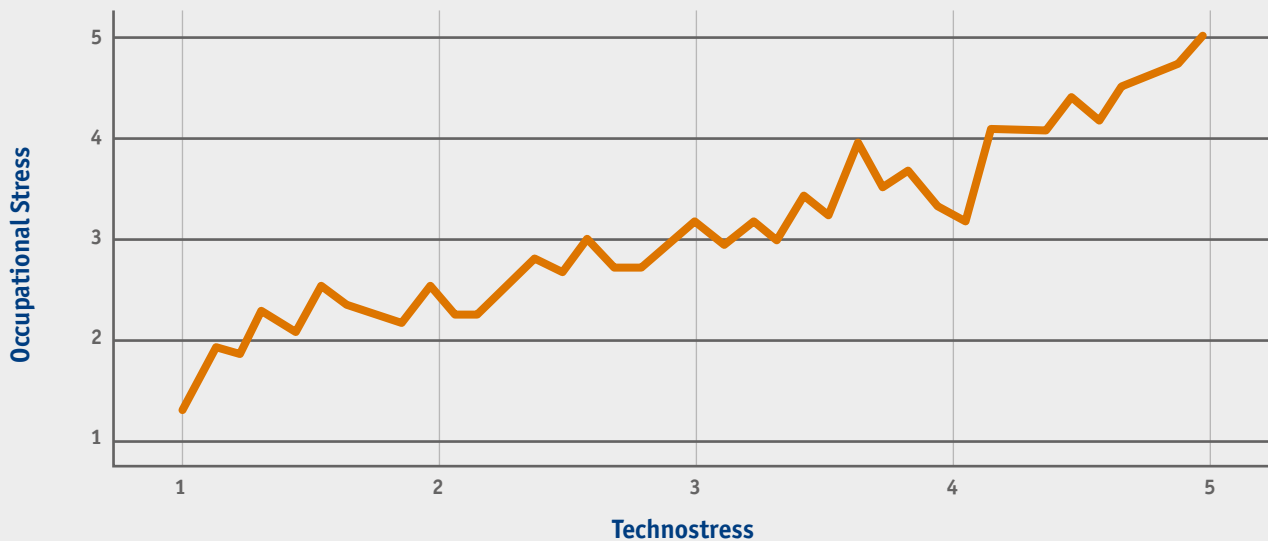
THE DANGERS OF AN “ALWAYS-ON” MINDSET

The introduction of more virtual work often has a significant impact on the organization's culture. The “culture of presence,” where work is done on-site during designated times, is shifting towards a **“culture of flexibility”**. This kind of culture has its advantages as it entails more freedom and independence in terms of working hours and place of work. Yet it also has certain drawbacks because it's often associated with an **“always-on” mindset**. Work is omnipresent in people's lives, leading to blurred

boundaries between work and non-work domains (Park et al., 2011). This can have a detrimental impact on employees' psyche as our research shows.

A culture that features the (tacit) expectation to be available around the clock can trigger a phenomenon termed **“technostress”**. Experiencing technostress implies the perceived intrusion into one's private life, digital surveillance, or struggling with steady changes and developments in the virtual desktop infrastructure (Nimrod, 2018). Our survey

Technostress entails occupational stress



The survey results reveal that employees who struggle with the rapid technological progress or have privacy concerns due to the increased digitalization of their work, experience significantly more occupational stress and exhaustion.

among 400 employees shows that an increased sense of technostress leads to higher levels of occupational stress (see Figure above). This means that people who are somewhat overwhelmed by and unhappy about an increase in their share of virtual work experience significantly greater work pressure and exhaustion.

Internal communication plays an important role in helping to develop and establish a healthy “culture of flexibility”. Continuous communication with the employees affected by flexible work arrangements is crucial for developing a communication plan that

supports employees and the organization in this change. Close cooperation with HR is also important.

How can organizations foster a healthy culture of flexibility?

- ✓ Implement virtual formats (e.g., podcasts, vlogs) regarding the issue of technostress and blurring boundaries
- ✓ Communicate life-hacks to prevent technostress and handle blurred boundaries
- ✓ Coach managers to support their co-workers
- ✓ Regular communication of expectations and rules by managers

» The negative thing is, of course, that there is a blurring between work and private life. The computer is on all the time and you look at the screen over and over again even if you're on a break because something could happen anytime. I sometimes feel guilty about taking a break. That can't be healthy. «

45-year-old account manager in the automotive industry

» After the lockdown had been imposed, a wave of people started sharing photos of what it was like working from home, including selfies with their pets. This caused some frustration among blue-collar workers as they felt aggrieved. That's when we started the campaign #InThisTogether with various communication activities to show the appreciation from all employee levels, e.g., plant visits from our board members as well as video messages and 'thank you' quotes displayed on digital screens at the production sites around the globe. «

Caterina Taeger, Head of Employee Communications, Siemens AG

THE POTENTIAL THREAT OF A TWO-CLASS SOCIETY

Are virtual work environments inclusive for all employees? Organizations with a high proportion of blue-collar workers face a major challenge when increasing the virtuality of work, because shop floor work can't be done from home. Oftentimes, production workers are also excluded from digital internal communication because they don't have computers, impeding their access to the intranet. The threat of this two-class society within the workforce became particularly acute during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many employees were forced to work from home, but shop floor workers had to be present. This led to envy and resentment.

To reduce information asymmetry and blue-collar workers' feelings of being treated worse than their

white-collar colleagues staying at home all day, organizations came up with specific measures for shop floor employees:

- Shop floor visits by top management (i.e., "management by walking around")
- Information terminals in production sites
- Info screens, QR codes and flyers to communicate important information and messages of appreciation
- Posters bearing appreciative statements from the CEO (e.g., on the pandemic, the current state of affairs, the future of the organization)
- Sending text messages with warnings and instructions to employees' cellphones
- Free lunches and personal protective equipment
- In a few cases, an employee app

» We are currently developing a new app that will give all employees access to the intranet and later also to the digital employee magazine. During the transition phase, production employees have access to the intranet via central information terminals, and we're trying to reach them with poster campaigns and digital information boards. «

Nina Skrzyszowski, Senior Communication Manager, B. Braun



HOW TO BOOST VIRTUAL INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

EIGHT LESSONS LEARNED BY INTERNAL COMMUNICATION EXPERTS

The sudden demise of the “culture of presence” has led to a transformation of internal communication. But how do employees experience this? And what lessons have experts drawn from the turbo-change to virtuality? Based on our qualitative interviews with employees and experts, we identified the desires of employees as well as eight lessons learned by communication experts for internal communication.

WHAT EMPLOYEES EXPECT

To find their way in the virtual world of work, employees need not just technical but also **psychological support**. This includes clear rules for dealing with the blurring of boundaries between work and private life as well as transparent information about the organization’s goals and medium-term plans regarding remote work.

Since virtual work is sometimes lonely, employees need **communication formats** such as informal meetings

with colleagues and fixed appointments to talk to supervisors and colleagues. In addition, organizations have to find new ways to recognize and appreciate employees’ work efforts and performance. From their top management, employees expect regular virtual communication via video messages and also invitations to participate in organizational processes. Finally, ways of taking part in virtual organizational events and activities during working hours to ensure that employees become and remain committed and engaged are becoming more important.

DOS AND DON'TS FROM AN EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

APPRECIATION



» The other day, there was a message from management out of the blue saying, 'Thank you to all employees. We think it's great how things are going, that you're all participating so well, that everyone is still working so diligently.' It's really nice to see that they appreciate our work. «

Junior marketing specialist (age 25)



» We don't hear anything from the people who could really change things and motivate us. Ultimately, no distinction is drawn between those who beaver away and those who just do the bare minimum. This isn't the way to keep employees. We know that the revenue loss is 0%, but we're still not receiving any appreciation for our hard work during this difficult time. «

Project manager (age 22)

TRANSPARENCY



» I really have the impression that our management tries to involve us and gives us all the relevant information because it's really important to them that we don't feel alone, neglected, or uninvolved. It's even better now because the management communicates more regularly and also more dedicatedly. «

Account manager (age 31)



» In the past, I'd have liked more transparency from top management regarding important decisions, and that hasn't changed. For example, I'd have liked to see more regular statements on the status quo and future development, especially during the coronavirus period. I'd also have liked more information about working from home or generally about coronavirus regulations in the office. «

Customer advisor (age 25)

TRUST



» What I personally like is that we now receive more trust from our superiors. Before, employee monitoring was very important. And then COVID came. That's when they realized that it works and that we're not all twiddling our thumbs and would rather be productive for the company. I hope that this trust will remain and that we'll be able to work from home, at least partly, after the pandemic, too. «

Program manager (age 34)



» We've only been briefly told that we're trustworthy regarding the way we work. But we can be checked at any time. Everyone knows that the boss can look at how often we hit the keys or how often we work through something. Everything is recorded and can be tracked. Even though we've been told that doesn't happen, I have my doubts. «

Sales specialist (age 57)

SUPPORT



» My company has also offered some seminars online. It always did before, but now this has been stepped up. Specifically, they focused on ergonomics at work and physical exercises. It was to make sure that people didn't miss out on anything, such as visiting the psychological counsellor, the company doctor, or the ergonomics consultant – that they got all this information at home as well. «

Software consultant (age 35)



» I think the company could provide more support and help people so that they can deal with the whole situation of virtual work a bit better. There is really a lack of support in terms of 'How do I make these meetings effective?' or 'How do I organize myself efficiently?' I'd find something like that helpful. «

Project manager (age 58)

EIGHT LESSONS LEARNED BY INTERNAL COMMUNICATION EXPERTS



LESSON 1

Internal communication is an important strategic business partner and not just a supplier of content and services – especially in times of crisis and change towards a hybrid work environment.

» Transparency, relevant content for different target groups, and interactive ways to communicate are key. When our colleagues react, ask questions or comment, we have to respond adequately.

Ignoring them is the worst thing you can do. Today, we in Communications need to address challenges and problems proactively. We aren't just senders of company messages. That was in the past. Today, we give guidance, explain the context, and consult leaders. «

Birgit Ziesche, Head of Global Internal Communications, Henkel

LESSON 2

Think and act more strategically in the hybrid environment. This means setting clear goals, developing measures to achieve them, and regular evaluation.

LESSON 3

Have a sympathetic ear for employees' problems and concerns, and ultimately act as a "sniffer dog" in the organization.

LESSON 4

Communicate in an authentic, short, transparent, and emotionally charged manner. Employees need relational communication to commit themselves to the organization and show engagement.

LESSON 5

Empower employees and managers so that they can effectively communicate and contribute themselves. This improves communication and makes the message content more interesting and expedient.

LESSON 6

Strengthen the expertise of internal communication practitioners because with communication needing to be fast and two-way, outsourcing is becoming increasingly unattractive.

» We realized that we didn't have all the skills we need in our communications team as in the past we relied a lot on external partners. For example on infographics or simple video editing. During the pandemic we developed our teams to become again proficient in tasks that we formerly outsourced. «

Alexander Lepa, Head of Connect & Engage Employees, Airbus

LESSON 7

Think "out of the box." Be courageous and experiment with communication formats and messages to find the most suitable ways to communicate in an employee-centric manner.

» What I've learned is how important it is to experiment – to play with various formats and approaches, even when they might not go down as well as expected, and then to learn from that, improve and use them in a more targeted way. We also need to listen to feedback to find out what works well and what doesn't. We want to get away from the mindset of 'We know exactly how to do it best.' We did a lot of feedback loops – known as pulse checks – last year to find out what the mood was and what employees needed. «

Daniela Winnicki, Head of Communications and Public Affairs, Bayer Austria

LESSON 8

Increase the proficient use of virtual and digital (communication) tools in order to apply them effectively in an employee-centric manner.

QUO VADIS?

The results of this research project underpin the important role of internal communications in the transition from a “culture of presence” to a “culture of flexibility.” The successful implementation of a hybrid work environment relies on the contribution of internal communication experts to tailor communications to employees’ specific demands for information, participation, and appreciation.



THE IRREVERSIBILITY OF VIRTUALIZATION AND HYBRID WORK

- ▶ More than half of our 1,000 survey participants reported that they would prefer teleworking to being in the office in the long term. While almost a quarter stated that they had no preference at all, only a fifth would (rather) work on-site.
- ▶ A study conducted by McKinsey & Company found that more than half of the survey respondents would like to work remotely at least three days per week. 29 percent would resign if they had to return to working fully on-site (Alexander et al., 2021).

Such findings show that the ongoing change process of virtualization and more hybrid work cannot be stopped after the pandemic is over, much less reversed.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS AS KEY PLAYERS, FACILITATORS, AND COLLABORATORS

Experts observed that the status of internal communication has clearly increased during the pandemic.

Internal communication experts were needed not just by employees but also consulted more often by corporate decision-makers (SCM et al., 2020). Nevertheless, internal communication must also reinvent itself to some extent. It's not just a matter of conveying its messages via new, often multimedia channels and thus acquiring the pertinent skills. Internal communicators are increasingly in the role of facilitators, providing the workforce with (technical and social) know-how to communicate and collaborate successfully in a more virtual world of work. This requires even closer collaboration with those responsible for HR and IT.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION'S ROLE AS A TREND TRACKER

The COVID-19 pandemic has intriguingly shown that listening is a vital task of internal communication. Many communication managers see themselves as “trend trackers”. In this regard, using all available forms of communication – from personal conversations to the analysis of internal media as well as surveys – to genuinely ascertain employees’ concerns and suggestions for improvements is vital if organizations want to improve virtual or hybrid communication practices.

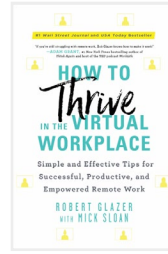
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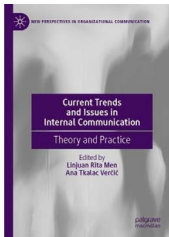
FURTHER READING



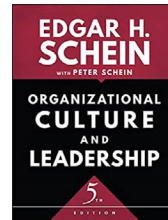
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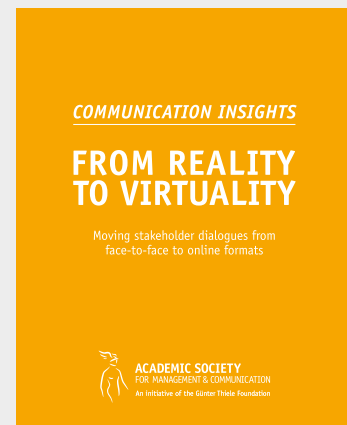
INTERESTED IN VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION WITH EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS?

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced communication departments to redesign stakeholder dialogues. How to move communication with external stakeholders from real-world settings to online formats? The research team consisting of Ansgar Zerfass, Daniel Ziegele and Hannah Kurtze from Leipzig University conducted 39 interviews with communicators from 35 German corporations, consultancies, and service providers between April and May 2021.

In Issue 12 of our Communication Insights you can learn more about the advantages and disadvantages of virtual stakeholder dialogues. Moreover, the

research team identified eight success factors for planning and conducting virtual dialogues with external stakeholders.

The study analyzed one of the five trends of the Communications Trend Radar 2021 – virtualization of communications. Each year, the Communications Trend Radar, a research project by the Academic Society for Management & Communication, identifies trends that influence corporate communications.



ACADEMIC SOCIETY FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

The Academic Society for Management & Communication is a non-profit think tank for corporate communications. Through collaborative research and knowledge sharing, it aims to actively shape the future of corporate communications. The initiative was founded in 2010, and is currently supported by six professors, four universities, and more than 40 corporate partners.

The Academic Society initiates practical, forward-looking research projects. These extensive, multi-disciplinary studies are designed to support the ongoing professionalization of corporate communications. In recent years, more than 20 research projects have been carried out in areas such as value creation, agility, digitalization, and automated communication.

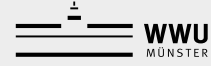
Since 2020, the Communications Trend Radar, an annual research project, has identified trends that impact corporate communications. The aim is to help communication leaders to identify emerging challenges and opportunities early on and set the right course.

The key findings of our research projects are published in the series Communication Insights and can be downloaded at bit.ly/ComInsights.

The Academic Society is part of the Günter Thiele Foundation for Communication & Management dedicated to advancing science and knowledge transfer in the field of communications.

For more information and updates, please visit academic-society.net.

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ISSN 2749-893X