Internal communication in a diverse and developing world context: Challenges for corporate South Africa

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Abstract

Internal communication plays a pivotal part in an organisation's survival. It is regarded as an investment in an organisation's success and underpins organisational effectiveness. However, when organisations face internal communication challenges, these can threaten internal relationships, with dire consequences for the organisation. This is particularly so in the volatile, uncertain, complicated and ambiguous South African corporate context, which presents direct challenges for internal communication management.

Internationally there has been an increase in studies exploring challenges for internal communication, with various authors indicating a need for further research. Our study addresses this gap by probing the internal communication challenges experienced in the South African corporate environment as a developing world view, to make recommendations for mitigating action.

This exploratory qualitative interview-based study focused on the perceptions of practitioners working in large organisations, as well as consultants with acknowledged expertise in the field of internal communication.

The findings confirmed that internal communication is a complex and multifaceted profession full of challenges. We identified 12 challenges, grouped into four clusters, namely access to technology, lack of formal communication training, parameters for inclusion of internal stakeholders, and management styles and structures. Contributions include recommendations for practice, together with suggestions for further research.

Keywords

INTRODUCTION

Internal communication is widely regarded as an investment in an organisation's success, one that underpins organisational effectiveness and sustainability (Lee et al., 2021). The communication management perspective on internal communication underscores this by stating that internal communication keeps internal stakeholders satisfied, motivated, and engaged (see Kaltiainen et al., 2020; Mbhele & De Beer, 2021). The potential benefits include, amongst others, higher revenue per employee, smooth running daily operations, an overall collaborative culture, motivating employees and managers to work towards achieving organisational goals, better performance, and increased physical and psychological well-being in the workplace (Dahlman & Heide, 2020). In addition, other scholars argued that effective internal communication leads to increased productivity, less staff absenteeism, increased levels of innovation, a decrease in strikes, higher quality service and products as well as reduced costs (Andersson, 2019).

It is therefore important to keep internal stakeholders satisfied as these groups are vital to the organisation's success (Argenti, 2009; Grunig & Huang, 2000). Disrupted relationships with internal stakeholders will clearly threaten organisational survival.

South African organisations face several challenges in what is labelled as the most trying and unstable

environment they have ever encountered (Kalidas et al., 2020). The South African environment is described by the acronym "VUCA" (Rockland, 2014): volatile, uncertain, complicated and ambiguous. Although most influences seemingly occur at the macro and meso levels of the organisation, they ripple through to the micro level, impacting on internal communication. Among the national challenges that affect the work of internal communication in South African organisations are poverty, and a lack of productivity, loyalty, trust, and motivation. Included in all of these are the developing nature of the economy and the diversity of the workforce. This situation mirrors similar situations in many other countries like India, China, East European and Middle Eastern countries, and other African nations (Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016; Idrees et al., 2022).

At an academic level, it is clear that several factors contribute to the challenges faced in internal communication. Several academics have pointed out that in previous years little attention was paid to research on internal communication (Verčič et al., 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007). However, there has been a growing number of more recent studies reflecting the greater challenge in this area (see Kim, 2020; Men & Yue, 2019; Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020; Yue et al., 2021). More recent studies are focused heavily on the impact of internal communication on features of the organisation such as organisational culture (Men & Yue, 2019); organisational change (Luo & Jiang, 2014; Yue et al., 2019); social media for employee communication (Ewing et al., 2019); internal crisis communication (Kim, 2018); employee behaviours (Lee & Kim, 2017); diversity (Ni et al., 2018); and leadership communication within the organisation (Thelen, 2019).

Similarly, South African scholars researching the field have focused on employee engagement (Mbhele & De Beer, 2021); change-communication (Slabbert, 2018); leadership communication (De Lange & Mulder, 2017); internal corporate image, internal branding and corporate identity for employees (Holtzhausen & Fourie, 2013; Scheffer & Crystal, 2008); and stakeholder relationship management in different contexts (Delport, 2020; Greef, 2013; Le Roux & Naudé, 2009).

Yet relatively little has been published on the challenges – without focusing on the features of the organisation – and mitigation strategies needed in internal communication, especially in the context of a developing country with diverse internal stakeholder groupings.

In addition, most studies that investigate internal communication challenges are written from a Western perspective and lack the local developing world perspective. The exception is Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta's (2012) study that included African and developing countries (see the below section on internal communication challenges). Lee and Yue (2020) rightly point out that future research in the discipline of internal communication should represent the non-Western context (such as South Africa). Consequently, the current study focuses on identifying internal communication issues in the South African corporate context, to fill the above-mentioned gaps in the research.

This study aims to examine the diverse and developing world context of the South African corporate environment, in order to make recommendations for internal communication mitigation strategies and their management. This is done in line with the call for more research to understand the internal communication environment which impacts the organisation's survival and success, in an increasingly complex world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining internal communication

Internal communication is studied and defined from different perspectives including human resources (Luthans & Youssef, 2004), public relations (Lee & Yue, 2020), organisational communication (Karanges et al., 2014), strategic communication (Dolphin, 2005), corporate communication (Welch & Jackson, 2007), employee communication (Invernizzi et al., 2012) and marketing (Lings & Greenley, 2005). Other definitions are focused more on the relational elements of internal communication aimed at creating a community of trust (Karanges et al., 2014:330) and open relationships (Jacobs et al., 2016:62).

In a recent definition, Lee and Yue (2020:2) focused on several key communication processes, with

a relational and holistic approach to defining internal communication in their definition: "The strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels within an organization through different communication processes including business communication, management communication, organizational communication, corporate communication, and strategic communication". For the purposes of this study, internal communication refers to the communication processes mentioned above by Lee and Yue (2020), with the purpose of achieving the relational elements highlighted by Karanges et al. (2014) and Jacobs et al. (2016) within the wide range of diverse stakeholders in the South African internal communication environment (Sutton et al., in press).

Internal communication challenges

Some international studies have identified internal communication challenges from a Western perspective. For example, an earlier study by Verčič et al. (2012) identified some challenges among European internal communication practitioners. These included 1) new internal digital and social media, 2) change communication, 3) crisis communication, 4) trust and credibility of leadership, 5) employee engagement, 6) loyalty, 7) motivation, 8) cultural diversity, 9) developing internal communication policies and standards, 10) auditing, budgeting, and return on investment measures, 11) value for money, and 12) outsourcing.

Nearly ten years later, writing from a Portuguese perspective, Araújo and Miranda (2021) identified similar challenges in internal communication, namely: 1) the empowered status of employees with their personal characteristics, 2) the rise of internet and social media, and 3) measuring and evaluation tools. They also argued that these trends are frequently present in other studies, based in Australia, the UK and USA, about internal communication (see, for example, Sebastião et al., 2017; Macnamara & Gregory, 2018; Ewing et al., 2019).

Even though these studies investigated internal communication challenges, they do not represent the local developing world or a non-Western perspective. The exception is Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta's (2012) study, which addressed language issues for an organisation operating in three different regions.

The South African corporate context

Cleophas (2022) believes that South Africa remains a racially divided country, and that the corporate environment is still directly affected by the aftermath of apartheid. Certain issues such as corruption, political and financial greed, unemployment, crime, and an uneven income distribution complicate economic growth for organisations and affect the daily life of various employees. Furthermore, regular employee strikes and the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) programme, highlight the unique corporate context of South Africa. In addition, the South African electricity utility Eskom is often unable to supply power to the entire country, resulting in rolling blackouts (loadshedding).

These mentioned factors impact the country's struggling economy and transfer pressure to organisations and employees to simply survive. In this situation, internal communication is crucial to manage the complex relationship between the organisation and employees.

Interestingly, internal communication practitioners may not want to look to overseas counterparts for solutions, as South Africa's problems are largely unique (Maritz, 2002:9) and not completely understood by Western scholars (Rensburg, 2002:10). Consequently, the current study focuses particularly on the internal communication challenges in the South African context as explained above.

RESEARCH METHODS

Following a qualitative approach (see Du Plooy, 2009; Moser & Korstjens, 2018), a total of 18 semi-structured Zoom-based interviews were conducted with two groups of internal communication specialists:

1. senior internal communication practitioners working within ten of South Africa's Top 500 companies, and,
2. eight experienced internal communication consultants in South Africa.

These information-rich individuals were purposively selected (Patton, 2015) from both groups to suit the study objectives. The first group comprised ten senior internal communication practitioners who headed internal communication management at ten organisations on the list of Top 500 companies in South Africa. The practitioners were chosen for their insider perspectives of how internal communication was managed at their companies. These practitioners represented a variety of business sectors, namely, education and training, health and beauty, hotels and holiday resorts, dairy production, mining, food processing, investment and asset management, agriculture, and diversified retailers.

The second group consisted of eight consultants in the field of internal communication management in the country; they were well-established communication practitioners and had received international awards for their work in internal communication. The consultants were included in the study because of their wider perspectives of internal communication, based on the organisations for which they consulted.

In qualitative research, the repetition of information is the guideline for the number of interviews conducted (Green & Thorogood, 2009:120; Moser & Korstjens, 2018:11). In this study, the point of data saturation was reached when the information started to repeat itself and no new information emerged. This was the case at the tenth internal communication practitioner and eighth consultant.

All respondents were informed in advance about the purpose of the research. Their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were employed for anonymity (i.e., practitioners were labelled P1–P10 and consultants C1–C8). The interview schedule was informed by themes identified from literature. The interviews lasted 50–60 minutes. The interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts were analysed by means of a thematic content analysis (Weber, 1990). The themes emerged through a constant comparison of the challenges that were identified and thereafter it was reduced to the challenges that occurred most (see Boeije, 2002).

FINDINGS

From the interviews we identified 12 different internal communication challenges in the corporate South African environment. The senior communication practitioners and internal communication consultants identified most of the same issues (in a few instances their perceptions were contradictory), even though they were specifically chosen to provide an insider and outsider perspective on the topic.

New technological advancements, but limited access

In the South African context technological advancements highlighted some challenges in internal communication. Respondent C1 described the situation: "We are struggling to use new technology to help with internal communication. It is sometimes a budget issue, sometimes an IT issue, and sometimes a resource and capacity issue to get new things implemented."

While it is generally accepted that everyone employed by the organisations has access to a mobile phone, some of the staff at the organisations participating in the study did not own a smartphone and therefore did not have access to the usual apps or social media on their phone. The respondents at companies where lower-level employees made up the majority of the staff (for example factory workers, miners and shopkeepers), argued that the nature of the organisation "determines what media is used, as it depends on whether the employees have access to new technological platforms" (P4).

In other instances, the problem is that the corporate environment in South Africa "still struggles with bandwidth" (P7). This reiterates the difference between first-world countries and third-world countries. Even after the COVID-19 pandemic, the reality of access to WiFi remains. It is not the norm that all organisations make free WiFi available on all parts of their premises for employees to use. In addition, some employees are not allowed to use their mobile phones while working their shifts (C3).

The impact of the above issue is especially significant to retail shop floor staff. As respondents explained: "When the customer walks in, he knows more than the staff member, because he [the staff member] does not even have access to the business's online platforms" (C8). It can therefore be argued that employees should be better empowered, "because if we can better serve the internal audience, they will be able to better serve the external audience" (P6).

A further example of the complexity of the problem is that most respondents mentioned measuring employee needs through electronic means. Therefore, the organisation cannot form a holistic picture of internal stakeholders' communication needs, because "you will only receive the manager's view that has access to email, but you will not get the store worker's feedback at ground level" (P9).

Information overload

The new media and channels tend to complicate internal communication as there are a variety of platforms available. A consultant explained: "It is a trend that I see with all my clients. If there is a communication problem, they add another newsletter, another email, another meeting, another social media tool, another campaign" (C4). In addition, a respondent explained that it becomes more difficult to communicate with internal stakeholders when all the different online media are taken into account, as "our communication must compete with the information they receive on their personal accounts" (P2).

Another respondent (P6) agreed and expanded that the use of more digital and electronic channels, especially emails, is the cause of internal communication problems. The reason for such problems is that "employees are overwhelmed with the incredible amount of information they receive" (P10), resulting in important messages becoming lost. It would seem that employees often feel that they are drowning in the information they receive and experience "death by email" (P2).

Diverse demographical characteristics

Respondents identified several key demographic challenges to effective communication with their internal stakeholders: significant gaps and inequalities in training and literacy levels, and the different languages spoken by employees. One of the consultants (C6) contrasted South African conditions with those elsewhere: "In countries like Canada, everyone has about a high school education ... We have high levels of inconsistency when it comes to education, language, access to medical care, transport, schools, all those types of things that make South Africa a much more complex place [in which] to communicate."

Another consultant (C4) explained some of the practical internal communication difficulties related to language and education in South Africa: "We have 11 official national languages – many other countries have at most two. When you launch a campaign at a mine in South Africa, you will simultaneously communicate with people who are functionally illiterate, as well as engineers who may have two or three degrees."

Prejudice and diversity

The respondents believed that due to South Africa's history, challenges such as prejudice about race, gender, religion, and other beliefs between people working together at the same institutions apply and need to be taken into account by internal communication practitioners.

A respondent specifically mentioned that South Africans live in a place and time "where we must be respectful of the context in which we live and the history that our country has" (C2). The diversity of the workforce, explained a practitioner, makes it "important that all internal stakeholder groups from different cultures, backgrounds, beliefs and orientations are treated equally" (P8). Furthermore, practitioners must be more sensitive "in terms of the messages sent out, the analogies used, and the images we use in our communication to avoid prejudice, due to our diverse nation" (C5).

The findings show that practitioners are acutely mindful of the need for their internal communications to be "sensitive and aware" (C1) of the differences among people. As one practitioner (P9) explained, "we send out emails from the CEO for every religious holiday, because if you send out a Christmas message, you cannot assume that everyone is a Christian. And then you must also send a message for all Muslim holidays, and also for all Hindus and all Jewish days ... I always send out a year-end message rather than a Christmas message" to accommodate all. The result is that more formal, impersonal, electronic communication is often sent to employees to treat everyone equally.

Little formal communication education

The consultants in particular felt strongly about the need for formally trained practitioners. It could be that the consultants who work with various companies see the impact of untrained communication practitioners internally, from an outsider's perspective. The consultants made the following statements:

- "Unfortunately, there are too many South African organisations, large and medium and small, that employ unqualified people in communication roles, and from there things deteriorate" (C1)
- "It is still an unfortunate reality that many organisations do not notice the contradiction: You hire someone in finance who has a financial degree and an engineer with an engineering qualification, but when it comes to communication, it is okay to just appoint anyone. That does not make sense" (C2)
- "I am highly frustrated when I work with organisations and some of them have up to 20 people in their communication departments and none of them have formal training in communication. It is beyond me" (C4)

In addition to the above, a consultant explained that many organisations tend to "move people from PA roles [personal assistants] into communication roles … From an operational point of view, this is okay, but if you want to do any strategic communication, you need to have people with formal communication training" (C5). The respondents explained that training is necessary for strategic communication management, as it is "for sure visible" if practitioners do not have "this type of training" (C8). A respondent expressed the issue as follows: "All the senior people in communication with whom I have had to work at a strategic level have a degree in communication – not even just a diploma, but advanced scholarship in the field" (C3). Another added, "I have previously worked in organisations where there was no formal communication training and this has certainly shown in the standard of work that has been done" (P3). It can therefore be concluded that formal communication training is necessary for a practitioner to function effectively at a strategic level.

The respondents were convinced that training in a changing context is becoming even more important, as explained by respondent P2: "I think we are moving to more digital platforms and therefore our writing skills will also have to change, for example … Although everyone can publish due to the new digital media, we need to be taught how to write shorter and stronger". The problem is that training often focuses on technical skills when it comes to training for technological progress with little training on a strategic level.

Uncertainty as to who are considered as internal stakeholders

It was evident from the interviews that there are different viewpoints regarding the classification of internal stakeholders, which is quite unique to the South African context.

Permanent employees are considered the traditional internal stakeholder group and internal communication therefore focuses largely on employees. However, it appears that the respondents have a broader view of internal stakeholders, contractors, part-time employees, consultants and agents are usually also regarded as internal stakeholders, especially when these people work very closely with the organisation.

The consultants mostly emphasised that contractors specifically form part of the internal stakeholder group based on the following characteristics: 1) they are paid by the organisation; 2) they are involved on the premises; 3) there are shared messages they need to receive such as safety messages; 4) they must comply with the same rules and internal policies as permanent employees; and 5) they represent the organisation to external stakeholder groups.

An interesting South African perspective was that some consultants included unions as an internal stakeholder, while another respondent specifically mentioned that a trade union should be treated as both internal and external stakeholder group "because you have to treat the trade union management and the trade union representative differently" (C7). Other respondents explained that union representatives are also employees and as such "receive all the internal communication in any case" (C5). In other words, it can be a structural reality and not a strategic choice of the organisation to share internal communication with unions.

Notwithstanding the above, the debate about unions as internal stakeholders highlights the confusion of who are part of the internal stakeholder demarcation.

Internal activism and the influence of trade unions

It was indicated that internal activism is a theme that emerged strongly within the corporate environment in South Africa. A respondent remarked, "In general in South Africa, you will have a degree of activism that you will have to manage. This is the nature of society and the nature of South Africans, and the organisation is a microcosm of society" (P4). Both practitioners and consultants mentioned that what happens in the broader South African society impacts behaviour within organisations:

- "The macro-economic environment in South Africa" creates an environment that "stimulates" activism (C4)
- "What happens externally in the country influences the thinking and behaviour of employees internally ... The racial tension is now worse than ten years ago and it shows how the personal agendas driven by the macro environment influence employees and they bring it into the work environment" (C7)

It was also mentioned that "it [internal activism] may be part of a corporate culture" (P1). Yet, it seems that internal activism depends on the industry or context, being most prevalent in the mining and education sectors, the latter being fuelled by the #FeesMustFall protests as explained by one of the respondents (P8) working in the higher education sector: "At this stage we have a divided academic community, because there are those who are for the #FeesMustFall campaigns and those who are against it. The division is from school level all the way to senate level."

It would seem that, generally speaking, trade unions exploit the external environment to promote their own agendas. One respondent (P7) explained that "We are still struggling to form a social unit, where you can sit with a trade union as an organised body and work together to run certain programmes". It further appears that the respondents feel that trade unions in South Africa are "still a substitute for political affairs" (P3). It is explained as follows: "If we really want to move forward, the unions will have to mature. They must become real unions and not quasi-political parties. What is currently happening is that as unions disintegrate, new unions need to position themselves; and the best way to position yourself is to become more radical" (C5). It therefore appears that radical trade unions with "political agendas" (C5) are often the reason for internal activism.

It appears then that respondents experienced internal activism as a negative issue. The consultants see internal activism "as an old-fashioned trade union confrontation with management" (C2). Trade unions are not yet seen as real participants in the organisation "where they help solve some of the social problems" (P5). It is instructive that some respondents regard trade union management as individuals who contribute to a negative perception of internal activism.

Hierarchy and line management

While internal stakeholders were encouraged to speak their minds, it was apparent from the respondents' comments that the company hierarchy must be respected: "You cannot go directly to the top of the structure and complain that your manager does not understand you ... there are processes to follow" (P1); and "You have to talk to your immediate superior and he then has to take it up again to the person to whom he reports ... it is a hierarchical structure to follow" (P4).

In addition, messages are filtered, and this level of filtering is described as "frightening" by a respondent (C3). The filtering is evident both in upwards and downwards communication. On the one hand, for example, respondents mentioned that "Authority is an obstacle to honest input from the ground up" and that organisations should try to "install a communication system" to move beyond authority so that senior management can "get information from the grassroots level" (C6). On the other hand, internal stakeholders do not have direct access to top management, and the messages of top-level management are also filtered and often do not reach the employees at ground level. This can lead to uncertainty and frustration because these employees often feel they are not being adequately informed. The main

gatekeeper in the filtering process would seem to be the direct line managers (i.e., middle level managers), and therefore their role in communication facilitation become crucial.

History of autocratic leaders influencing current internal relationships

It appears from some cases that previous management members had a negative effect on the companies and the relationship between internal stakeholders and senior management, as is evident from the comment: "It is important to recognise where the organisation comes from. I think in the past certain leaders did not behave in accordance with our values" (P2). This could mean that communication flow and the organisational culture within the history of that relationship have been negatively experienced.

However, it is interesting that one respondent emphasised how there are generally no drastic changes in the culture within South African organisations due to the influence of new emerging or successor managers. The respondent explained: "There is a lot of change in the leadership in South African organisations. There are many young, emerging black leaders, but they do not necessarily change the organisational culture. They just follow the same system in which they were brought in" (P5). This finding is of particular interest when considering leadership communication, and this perception would warrant further investigation.

Authoritarian leadership style and an internal culture of non-involvement

From the interviews it emerged that the style of leadership communication seems to be mostly one-way and top-down. A respondent (P4) even explicitly emphasised that the internal stakeholder groups do not really have a say in the organisation. Some respondents made mention of obligating employees: "We sometimes force the employees to do things …" Another respondent (P6) spoke of a "militaristic system" being followed, so that the organisation can be the best within that industry.

Furthering this thinking, respondents argued that organisations produce better outputs where the internal corporate culture and systems are mostly authoritarian, highly structured and formal: "The corporate businesses do their best to get employees involved. They bend backwards for the employees because the theory says if they are involved employees they will perform better, customer service will be better and staff turnover will be lower. The chain stores do none of this, but they perform better in every area of the business" (C6). This view was reiterated by a few other respondents. Given this and the previous arguments, it can be concluded that the current trend in South Africa is still one of conservative, formal and authoritarian management styles. This finding is in direct conflict with the literature, which assumes that a participatory culture, where a climate of innovation and two-way symmetrical communication prevails, will lead to a better performing company (see Grunig & Huang, 2000; Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020). These specific findings require further investigation.

On the one hand, it is notable that the respondents indicated that employees are careful about challenging management. This may imply that employees find the style of leadership communication threatening and consequently they do not have the courage to truly oppose top management's statements. It could also be that there is a significant difference in the levels (from top management to ground-level employees) and that employees generally show respect for their senior management. According to South African culture, people should show respect for leaders and persons in positions of authority and therefore should not oppose them.

On the other hand, there also seems to be a reluctance by internal stakeholders to provide input and contribute innovatively to decision making, as is evident from the following comments: "I get frustrated with the fact that employees are constantly complaining that management is not talking to them. If I ask them if they attended the community meeting or the small group meeting, the answer is usually no … I feel the employees are inactive, uninvolved and they do not care. You can do whatever you want, it does not change" (C5). Some of the respondents blamed external influences, such as "domestic circumstances" (P5), "political influences" (P6) and "personal issues" (P8) for affecting employees' participation and involvement in the organisation.

Internal distrust

The respondents acknowledged the lack of trust between management and employees was a problem, as is evident from the remarks, "In general, I think people trust management just as much as they trust the leaders of our country" (P6) and "There is little trust between employees and management, but there is also always scepticism" (C3).

From the responses it was evident that the trust was dependent on the relationship between the line manager and employee. This is in line with the importance of direct line managers within the hierarchical system as discussed earlier. As agreed, uninformed employees are sceptical and this in turn affects the degree of trust, which ultimately affects the relationship between the parties.

A further reason impacting on the trust relations, was the political climate in South Africa which is abused by trade unions (as discussed above) and contributes to a relationship of mistrust. It seems that the "politics in our country" (P7) and with it the trade unions have an "incredibly large role" (P5) and a "significant effect on trust" (C5). The unions are blamed for being abused by political leaders for constantly "bombarding people with negative messages" (P2) and emphasising all the problems "instead of trying to build together" (C2).

Limited access to decision-making input from communication departments

A major issue identified by the respondents is that communication departments function only at a tactical level and are limited in their strategic contribution to the organisation. As a respondent pointed out: "It does not happen that we can contribute to decisions that are considered by top-level management. With us, the communication people are much more operational" (P6). The focus of the communications departments is therefore usually on more technical tasks. However, the respondents explained: "It is crucial that strategic communication and especially the corporate communication manager form part of the senior leadership team and are invited to senior executive management meetings. Ideally, there should be someone who represents communication at EXCO level" (C1). From the responses, it is clear that the involvement in strategic communication does not in fact come to the fore in all organisations.

DISCUSSION

The interviews with internal communication practitioners and consultants generated new insights into the challenges associated with internal communication and can be summarised into the following four themes: access to technology, lack of formal communication training, parameters for inclusion of internal stakeholders, and management styles and structures.

Access to technology

Incorporating the advancement of technology, the internet and digital media are a worldwide trend for the field of internal communication (Goodman et al., 2017; Neill & Jiang, 2017). Technology, on the one hand, has made it easier to distribute communications on a large scale among internal stakeholders (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2017). On the other hand, it also seems to be a worldwide trend that internal stakeholders suffer from an overload of information (Kovaitė et al., 2020; Madsen, 2017), as was pointed out in this study. Employees often complain that they are drowning in communication, which they find largely irrelevant or meaningless (Sutton, 2014), as is the case in our study as well.

However, García-Morales et al. (2011) argue that new technologies should help overcome barriers in time and space. Other international scholars (Kovaitė, 2020) also mentioned risk reduction and collaboration as advantages of new technologies in the workplace to strengthen internal communication. However, in the South African context, it should be highlighted that the opportunities and advantages of the worldwide technological progress can seldom be implemented and pursued in organisations because of certain constraints such as limited or no access to free WiFi, digital platforms or internet-connected smartphones. As indicated in the findings, some employees do not even have access to email. The industry has an influence on access as well because some employees (for example, on a shop floor, in a mine or factory) are not permitted to use devices while at work, because of safety rules. Contrarily, in

a developing country, the workplace is the only place they would have access to the internet.

The contrast between employees who receive an overload of information electronically and those who do not receive any information digitally creates a communication chasm that is difficult to bridge.

Lack of formal communication training

South Africans face societal issues that influence the corporate internal work environment and consequently internal communication. The findings in our study highlighted significant gaps and extreme differences in training and literacy levels, incomes, access to public services, and employees' languages, that need to be understood and taken into account by internal communication practitioners. Unfortunately, low education levels in South Africa are echoed in the low levels of formal training reported by our respondents among many of the internal communication staff members. Our findings are consistent with the literature but indicate an additional need for continuous development of internal communication skills, as is encouraged in other countries (Verčič et al., 2012). Further education in communication would also assist practitioners to navigate the current avoidance of the normative two-way symmetrical style of communication in order not to offend employees, but rather to embrace the more effective two-way symmetrical communication and engagement for internal communication (Mbhele & De Beer, 2021).

Parameters for inclusion of internal stakeholders

In the UK, Welch and Jackson (2007) stated that there is not a single umbrella cataloguing for internal stakeholders. However, our study shows that such classification depends on the way the organisation is structured, what the industry looks like and the structuring of workers in the organisation. Contrary to Welch and Jackson (2007:193), who identified "internal line manager communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication, and internal corporate communication" as dimensions of stakeholder groupings, the respondents in our study highlighted that internal stakeholders in the South African context should be classified differently. In South Africa internal stakeholders should be categorised based on the organisation's business model, and include trade unions, contractors, part-time employees, consultants, and agents. Consequently, there is not just one parameter used to determine who the internal stakeholder group are. Additionally, our findings reiterate that employees, as a traditional internal stakeholder group, cannot be regarded as a homogeneous entity, which contributes to the complexity and art of internal communication management in corporate South Africa.

Of particular interest is the categorisation of unions as internal stakeholders in the South African context. As discussed, politically driven trade unions can fuel friction between an organisation and its employees that could potentially lead to internal activism as a negative or destructive action. This is in contrast with research done in the developed world that portrays internal activism in a positive light (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). The respondents suggested including unions in the internal stakeholder groups as a solution in the politically fuelled South African corporate environment.

Management styles and structures

There seems to be a large hierarchical gap between top-level management and lower-level employees in South African organisations. This, combined with the authoritarian leadership style of senior management, based on one-way communication which often leads to better organisational results, is in contrast with international literature that promotes a participatory culture, a climate of innovation and two-way symmetrical communication for organisational success.

This study has indicated that although the authoritarian leadership style does not affect organisational outcomes, it has a direct negative influence on trust between top-level and lower-level employees. Communication facilitation from direct line managers (i.e., middle management) is crucial in restoring these relationships and rekindling the relationship of trust.

Given that trust in senior management is a major issue worldwide (Edelman, 2022), communication training of line managers becomes central to ensure strong employee relationships. Unfortunately, the communication departments themselves are lacking in training and access to strategic organisational

discussions, and therefore are not able to provide this supportive function to line managers. It would seem that communication training for the communication department could benefit a wider audience than initially thought.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Both internal communication practitioners and communication consultants pointed out that internal communication is a complex and multifaceted profession that is difficult to manage. Against the background some guidelines are provided to navigate internal communication in the complex South African environment.

With regard to the inclusion of stakeholders in internal communication, the parameters of stakeholders included as internal stakeholders should be overtly addressed in the organisation, as thus could vary from sector to sector. In particular, the inclusion of unions must be considered. In addition, when segmenting internal stakeholders, careful consideration should be given to groups that could suffer either from information overload or scarcity.

Continuous communication training for the communication department should be prioritised. Increased knowledge could assist practitioners to be sensitive in addressing the communication needs of a very diverse workforce. It should also allow them greater insight and input into strategic decision-making processes. The training will also benefit the larger organisation, as practitioners will then be able to support line managers in their task as communication facilitators.

Greater efforts for more effective, two-way symmetrical communication should be made throughout the organisation, and be supported by the communication department. For instance, line managers, with their crucial communication function, can assist to interpret information for employees and feed information to management. Employees should be encouraged to engage in conversations. Where internal activism is displayed, a clear vision of a shared goal should be agreed with employees.

Operational communication should not only be built on new technological advancements but accommodate the various employee needs and diversities. For instance, employees need to be enabled with important communication in the space where their work takes place.

The contribution of the article lies in broad guidelines for internal communication in a unique South African context that could be considered different from a developed, Western perspective.

Based on our findings, we offer the following suggestions for future internal communication research to consider. While the aim of this study was to explore and understand the complexities of internal communication in a certain environment, its findings can be generalised by involving a larger population. Future studies could focus on investigating the identified issues of the current study within SME or government environments. Future studies may also consider including the views of employees in the research, and the findings could be further adapted to the post-COVID-19 setting.

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