
Guest editorial: Shifting role and challenges of internal communication in an age of workplace turbulence/disruption

Guest editorial

285

Internal communication is so interconnected with organizing processes, organizational structure, environment, power dynamics and culture that some argue organizations couldn't exist without communication (Grunig, 1992). Therefore, internal communication is not merely an essential factor for attaining organizational success; it also serves as a foundational element for the very existence of the organization, especially during disruptive organizational changes (Kitchen and Daly, 2002).

Organizations have gone through drastic functional and cultural changes over the past decade. These changes have undoubtedly become evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post-pandemic workplace. As the labor market slowly rebounds from the two-year-long pandemic brought on by COVID-19, remote work, zoom fatigues and no work/home boundaries have led to increased burnout and a desire for employees to sit back from their work while recovering from the psychological and physical tolls they took on their health and well-being (Kang, 2023). McKinsey & Co projected in their 2021 report that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated trends in remote work and automation, with up to 25% more workers than previously estimated potentially needing to switch occupations.

Additionally, the threat of slow economic growth and an unstable labor market has made organizations anxious about the rise of dissatisfied, disengaged employees and high turnover rates with generational conflicts in the workplace.

According to Gallup's (2022) report on the State of the Global Workplace, employee stress is at an all-time high, and employee engagement and well-being are stable yet still low. More than 40% of employees surveyed indicated feeling stressed at work, and only about one-third reported a general sense of well-being. Still, only 21% of survey respondents reported feeling engaged at work. Related to these changing workplace dynamics and employee expectations and needs, internal communicators are increasingly faced with challenges and technological changes while tasked with creating a shared identity and culture across an ever more diverse workforce. These challenges include, but are not limited to, creating a shared sense of community among employees across geographic locations, modes of workplace (hybrid, in-person and remote) and demographic differences, via organizational communication to increase job and organization engagement from employees and enhancing commitment and loyalty of employees.

The Work Institute's (2022) Retention Report revealed that many employees' root causes of voluntary departure were multifaceted in that while better pay still mattered, but it did not as much as other reasons such as career development, health, family or work-life balance. In attracting and retaining top talents, organizations can no longer rely on monetary incentives and must understand the complexity of the employee-organization relationships in the contemporary workforce. Relatedly, no longer is internal communication considered a top-down, information-relaying function, primarily driven by program outputs. Strategic internal communication can have objective-driven impacts on employee engagement, job satisfaction, well-being, commitment and participatory and diverse culture. The cruciality of excellent communication in creating a diverse, participatory, purposeful and engaging organization is



beckoning scholars and practitioners to harness the power of internal communication in meeting some ongoing and newly emerging challenges.

The aim of this special issue was to explore, understand and propose new and renewed approaches and perspectives regarding the functions of internal communication in addressing digital disruptions in the past decade, compounded with the challenges that organizations are facing post-COVID-19 pandemic. In this issue, we have nine articles that address issues on internal communication from critical, cultural and normative lenses from authors in the USA, Australia and Austria.

Short summaries of each article in the issue are as follows.

LaGree, D. *et al.*, Combatting the “great discontent”: the impact of employability culture and leadership empowerment on career growth, loyalty and satisfaction

[LaGree *et al.* \(2024\)](#) responded to the special issue’s call by addressing the challenges faced by organizations during the post-COVID-19 recovery period, characterized by burnout, dissatisfaction and high turnover rates known as The Great Discontent. Their focus was on how organizational communication strategies could mitigate these challenges. They examined the impact of internal communication strategies centered on fostering employability within the organization and empowering leadership on employees’ career progression, loyalty and satisfaction within the workplace. Using an online survey targeting full-time employees in the United States of America, they discovered significant associations between organizational support for employee upskilling or reskilling opportunities and leadership empowerment and employees’ perceptions of career growth, job satisfaction, engagement and loyalty. The study highlights the evolving role of internal communication as it shifts away from simply delivering information to actively contributing to the creation of a culture that emphasizes employee empowerment, growth and meaningful engagement. This shift is essential as employees grapple with anxieties related to changing work expectations and required skills in the evolving work landscape.

Kazmi, S. *et al.*, Waiting for the punch(line): the circuit of culture and internal public relations at Netflix

[Kazmi *et al.* \(2024\)](#) examined the response triggered by Netflix’s 2020 release, “The Closer,” which led to significant reactions and resistance from its employees due to content involving Dave Chappelle’s humor about the LGBTQ+ community. The researchers delved into this internal clash of values through the framework of the circuit of culture (CoC) ([Curtin and Gaither, 2005](#); [du Gay, 1997](#)). The CoC framework offers a critical perspective for communication professionals to understand how cultural elements, such as Netflix’s Culture Deck, interact during negotiations and conflicts between management and employees regarding the brand’s identity. Their case study raises a fundamental question about the ownership of corporate identity – whether it lies with employees or management – and explores power dynamics in influencing or imposing control over contested corporate identities. It sheds light on the struggles and tensions that arise within organizations when differing values and identities clash between management and the workforce.

Wahl, I. *et al.*, Mitigating teleworkers’ perceived technological complexity and work strains through supportive team communication

Through an online survey with employees in Germany and Austria, [Wahl *et al.* \(2024\)](#) directly tackle the challenges posed by remote work. [Wahl *et al.* \(2024\)](#) specifically examined how supportive team communication can alleviate the stress arising from technological complexities

and perceptions of work-related strains associated with the use of information and communication technology (ICT). Grounding their research in the job demands-resources model by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), the study revealed that supportive team communication, characterized by factors such as providing adequate information, maintaining contact with colleagues, fostering openness and transparency and receiving support from coworkers, significantly reduced teleworkers' stress arising from technological complexities. Additionally, the study identified that increased levels of telecommuting were negatively correlated with stress levels, while stress was positively linked to work-related strains. The relationship between supportive team communication, work-related strains and occupational stresses experienced by teleworkers was mediated by the level of stress arising from technological complexities. These findings underscore the importance of addressing and managing stress resulting from technological complexities through effective communication strategies. The study suggests initiatives such as onboarding processes, comprehensive training and support systems (e.g. real-time assistance, tutorials and peer-support networks) to enhance employees' proficiency in utilizing ICT tools and alleviate stress associated with remote work.

Sandham, S., Voice and “digital disruption” in internal communication job advertisements: proposing a vocality continuum

Sandham (2024)'s study titled “Voice and ‘digital disruption’ in internal communication job advertisements: proposing a vocality continuum” delves into how digital disruption and organizational priorities have impacted the expectations outlined in job advertisements for internal communication roles. The research explores the tension between the traditional preference for one-sided communication practices and the prevalence of multifaceted communication in the digital sphere. The study examines how these dynamics are represented in job advertisements, shedding light on the evolving nature of the internal communication function. Despite the influence of digital technology, the study found that expectations regarding control and consistency in communication practices continue to dominate. Additionally, the study noted that digital capabilities and a preference for broadcasting or transmitting information remained largely unchanged across the study's timeframe.

Capizzo, L. *et al.*, Permanent scars, improvisation and new paths forward: communication agency leadership responses to COVID-19

Capizzo *et al.* (2024) conducted in-depth interviews with 18 USA agency leaders to discover how internal communication has changed following the COVID-19 pandemic. They found agency executives were utilizing a variety of new strategies and approaches (e.g. such as expanded use of videoconferencing technology, additional one-on-one supervisor meetings and clearer client boundaries). The agency executives also prioritized transparency and trust and shifted toward a more empathetic style of leadership. The authors also noticed a greater focus on diversity, equity and inclusion following the murder of George Floyd. In summary, many agency leaders responded to these challenges by creating more inclusive team cultures, reflecting on their own values and listening to their employees.

Chen, F. and Wu, Q.L., Health-oriented leadership communication matters: a trickle-down model to enhance employees' health and well-being during turbulent times

Chen and Wu (2024) conducted an online survey with USA employees to learn how organizational leaders at different hierarchical levels can enhance employees' health and well-

being through communication. Through structural equation modeling, they found that health-oriented leadership communication at both the supervisor and executive levels contributed to employees' self-care following the pandemic. However, there were limitations in that health-oriented communication, which did not necessarily lead to reduced employee stress. Health-oriented leadership includes three components: (1) leaders' health value (i.e. the extent the leaders prioritize health issues at work), (2) leaders' health awareness (i.e. leaders' perceptions and evaluations of followers' strain and well-being) and (3) leaders' health-specific behaviors (i.e. leaders' behaviors to strengthen employees' health, such as avoiding excessive overtime). In summary, the authors found that supervisors' health-oriented leadership communication exerted a strong direct effect on employees' self-care, and executive leaders' health-oriented leadership communication significantly influenced supervisors' health-oriented leadership communication, which in turn reinforced employees' self-care.

Yue, C.A. *et al.*, The dark side of leadership communication: the impact of supervisor verbal aggressiveness on workplace culture, employee-organization relationships and counterproductive work behaviors

[Yue *et al.* \(2024\)](#) conducted an online survey with USA employees to examine how the verbal aggressiveness of supervisors influences workplace emotional culture, the quality of employee-organization relationships and the prevalence of counterproductive work behaviors. Through structural equation modeling, [Yue *et al.* \(2024\)](#) found that supervisors' verbal aggressiveness had a significant positive association with negative emotional culture within their team and employee counterproductive work behavior (e.g. insulting and ignoring someone at work or slacking off). However, it had no direct impact on employee-organization relationships, which was fully mediated by the negative emotional culture within the team. Based on the findings, [Yue *et al.* \(2024\)](#) recommends that organizations inform supervisors about the effects of verbally aggressive behavior; provide communication training with a focus on empathy, transparency, authenticity and responsiveness and consider repercussions for those who engage in aggressive behavior.

Zheng, Q. *et al.*, When relational transparency backfires: examining the various impacts of authentic leadership on employee trust during the COVID-19 pandemic

[Zheng *et al.* \(2024\)](#) conducted an online survey with USA employees to examine the influence of attributes associated with authentic leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through structural equation modeling, they found that self-awareness, balanced processing and internalized moral perspective can positively affect employee-organization fit, and both self-awareness and balanced processing are significantly associated with trust in the employer. The authors also found that relational transparency was negatively associated with employee-organization fit and had no significant impact on organizational trust. Based on this finding, the authors suggested that "Openness and transparency about leaders' authentic selves can be a double-edged sword for employees amid uncertainties . . . when people are stressed, relational transparency could be misinterpreted as over-disclosure, unprofessionalism or a lack of self-control." They also discussed different perceptions about authentic leadership among men and women: for men, self-awareness significantly improves employee-organization fit, and for women, self-awareness enhances trust in the employer.

Dong, E. *et al.*, Linking interacting/engaging environmental CSR communication strategy and employees' pro-environmental behaviors (PEBs): mediating roles of communal relationship and employee empowerment

[Dong *et al.* \(2024\)](#) conducted an online survey with USA employees to explore the impact of interacting with and engaging in environmental CSR communication strategies on

employees' pro-environmental behaviors. Through structural equation modeling, they found that when organizations consult employees for their opinions and integrate their feedback during the planning and implementation of environmental CSR, employees feel valued, respected and included. These positive perceptions enhance the communal relationship between employees and their organization and result in employees' empowerment to take actions to support and improve the environmental initiatives, which consequently stimulates employees' pro-environmental behaviors. Based on their findings, the authors recommend that leaders invite employees to share opinions, thoughts and comments on environmentally responsible practices through question and answer events, town hall meetings, internal social media, virtual conferencing, or informal gatherings and then incorporate employee feedback as appropriate.

Collectively, these studies provide new theoretical and practical insights into the discipline of internal communication by addressing turbulence associated with the post-pandemic environment, health-oriented leadership communication and lesser researched areas such as the impact of supervisor verbally abusive behavior and the pros and cons associated with authentic leadership. We appreciate the contributions of all of the authors, which fulfilled the vision we had for this special issue.

Marlene S. Neill

*Department of Journalism, Public Relations and New Media,
College of Arts and Sciences, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA, and*

Minjeong Kang

Department of Journalism, Indiana University Bloomington, Bloomington, Indiana, USA

References

- Bakker, A.B. and Demerouti, E. (2007), "The job demands-resources model: state of the art", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 309-328, doi: [10.1108/02683940710733115](https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940710733115).
- Capizzo, L., Nzau, T., Oduolowu, D., Duffy, M. and Brengarth, L. (2024), "Permanent scars, improvisation and new paths forward: communication agency leadership responses to COVID-19", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 362-383, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0079](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0079).
- Chen, F. and Wu, Q.L. (2024), "Health-oriented leadership communication matters: a trickle-down model to enhance employees' health and well-being during turbulent times", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 384-404, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-03-2023-0029](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-03-2023-0029).
- Curtin, P.A. and Gaither, T.K. (2005), "Privileging identity, difference, and power: the circuit of culture as a basis for public relations theory", *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 91-115, doi: [10.1207/s1532754xjpr1702_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr1702_3).
- Dong, E., Sun, R. and Lee, Y. (2024), "Linking interacting/engaging environmental CSR communication strategy and employees' pro-environmental behaviors (PEBs): mediating roles of communal relationship and employee empowerment", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 451-472, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0068](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0068).
- Du Gay, P. (1997), *Production of Culture*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Gallup (2022), *State of the Global Workforce: 2022 Report*.
- Grunig, J. (1992), *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ.
- Kazmi, S., Heisten, M. and St John III, B. (2024), "Waiting for the punch(line): the circuit of culture and internal public relations at Netflix", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 312-328, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0078](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0078).

- Kitchen, P.J. and Daly, F. (2002), "Internal communication during change management", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 46-53, doi: [10.1108/13563280210416035](https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280210416035).
- LaGree, D., Olsen, K., Tefertiller, A. and Vasquez, R. (2024), "Combatting the 'great discontent': the impact of employability culture and leadership empowerment on career growth, loyalty and satisfaction", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 291-311, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-04-2023-0058](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-04-2023-0058).
- McKinsey Global Institute (2021), *The Future of Work after COVID-19*, McKinsey & Company, available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19>
- Sandham, S. (2024), "Voice and 'digital disruption' in internal communication job advertisements: proposing a vocality continuum", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 346-361, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0075](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0075).
- Wahl, I., Wolfgruber, D. and Einwiller, S. (2024), "Mitigating teleworkers' perceived technological complexity and work strains through supportive team communication", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 329-345, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0061](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0061).
- Work Institute (2022), *2022 Retention Report*, available at: <https://info.workinstitute.com/2022-retention-report>
- Yue, C.A., Qin, Y.S. and Men, L.R. (2024), "The dark side of leadership communication: the impact of supervisor verbal aggressiveness on workplace culture, employee-organization relationships and counterproductive work behaviors", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 405-429, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-04-2023-0050](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-04-2023-0050).
- Zheng, Q., Dong, C. and Zhang, Y. (2024), "When relational transparency backfires: examining the various impacts of authentic leadership on employee trust during the COVID-19 pandemic", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 430-450, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0066](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-05-2023-0066).