

# NATURE OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AMONG E-WORKERS, CASE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Research background: COVID-19 pandemic caused a rapid shift to full-time remote work environment. Workforce productivity, engagement, and success are affected by how the company interacts with its workforce. Human-to-human connection without clear communication is impossible. Communication is essential for a stable, engaged company. In e-work environment even more.

Purpose of the article: The purpose of this study is to provide recommendations for improving the flow of information and strengthen the sense of community among real e-employees in a remote work environment.

Methods: a quantitative study (web-based survey) in a Greek multicultural company has been used. Authors tried to find answers to following research questions: How do e-employees perceive internal communication methods in their organization? Which of the internal communication channels were used most effectively?

Findings & Value added: Based on the created questionnaire, a total of 7 hypotheses were determined, all of which were statistically confirmed. Obtained data confirms the raising importance of internal communication, especially in times of crisis as employees considered as a homogenous. We can underline the sample based in Greece but located various European countries and in a context of unprecedented crisis. English as predominant spoken language. Finally, this research only explores the role of internal communication in an organizational context (formal, casual, organized, or unplanned).

The survey was conducted during pandemics and has some interesting implications for communication professionals and researchers in the field of internal communication.

The present study examines internal communication in e-working settings. Previous studies have excluded the situation for e-employees. The results provide new insights into internal communication behaviour in e-work.

Keywords: internal communication, e-work, methods, channels, multiculturality

JEL classification: D83, M12, M21, M54, J21

## 1 INTRODUCTION

E-working is occasionally promoted as having the potential to be the great equaliser of economic opportunity, competitiveness and sustainability.

According to EU statistics, in 2019, 5.5% employees worked from home, in 2020, due to the pandemic, this share increased to 12.3%; and in 2021, to 13.5% (Eurostat, 2022). Work from home (WFH) or e-commuting (Beno and Caganova, 2023) allows flexibility for individuals with personal and professional goals. However, it also comes with challenges (Ambikapathy and Ali, 2020; Kurkland and Bailey, 1999; Beno, 2021). Especially in relation to workplace engagement, including communication (Cagáňová et al., 2019). Erum et al. (2020, p. 16) stated that “when employees have a calling to their work they find themselves more adjusted for their job and are more likely to feel passion towards it, they are intrinsically motivated to perform it thus deriving happiness in their workplace”. This disengagement causes various problems due to lowered productivity and decreased satisfaction. Lal et al. (2021) highlighted that social interactions (in the on-site workplace) are an essential feature of social life and shape the workforce’s experience of work. However, organizations are able to work to intentionally address these issues. The potential tool may be internal communication (IC) (Cagáňová et al., 2015). It may help e-workers feel more socially connected.

IC is often interlinked with an organization’s reputation and brand. But one of the most crucial links in the organization, which is easily overlooked, is the internal one, namely the workforce. They are the ones who create the brand. Organizations are able to convey the ambitions and values of the brands, but very often sufficient information flow is missing. IC increases trust in organizations, which is often associated with business success. (Cagáňová et al., 2010).

IC should be a deliberate, well-planned, and well-articulated element of a company’s communication strategy. Many organizations are still operating remotely with employees scattered across the nation and around the world, like the authors’ sample. Thus, it can be difficult to communicate in a way that keeps everyone engaged. Numerous studies have examined the main issues of IC (Flynn and Mazor, 2017; Oak, 2022; Robert Half, 2013; Queens University, 2023) and have linked IC and the degree to which employees are informed to job satisfaction and performance. The competitive benefits of IC come not only from satisfaction, productivity and sense of community but also from the positivity of external public relations. The purpose of this study is to provide recommendations for improving the flow of information and strengthen the sense of community among real e-employees in a remote work environment.

Simply identify and describe IC according to e-employees. A quantitative IC study has been chosen to identify the issues faced by e-employees in order to answer these questions. The following research questions were outlined:

How do e-employees perceive IC methods in their organization?

Which of the internal communication channels were used most effectively?

The company under investigation required anonymity. Its internal communication system was launched several years ago. In the questionnaire survey, employees and basic managers made up the largest sample, but middle and top managers also participated. The survey was conducted in a Greek multicultural company, with employees from Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Greece, Portugal, and Romania. All interviewees (total 182) met the condition of remote working mode.

## 2 METHODS

According to McDonough and McDonough (1997), the authors of this study implemented both interpretive and evaluative case study with the aim to interpret the data by developing conceptual categories and add judgement to the phenomena in the data. It allows a deeper understanding of the specifics of IC, providing a close understanding of the e-employees on IC and its meaning.

Because of the nature of a case-study, purposeful sampling was conducted with the emphasis on selecting an information rich group of respondents. The study is conducted on the entire target population which consists of 182 e-employees (57.7% of females, 40.7% of males and 1.6% diverse) with an average age 32, median 30 of a global Greece organization in operating in sector service. This confirms that service sector is the area with the highest female labour rate (Worldbank, 2021). Effective IC can be expected to be an important variable among surveyed e-workforce. All respondents worked for an Greek company, but they work in a remote working mode, i.e. they meet the conditions for the research of this work. At the same time, these are respondents from European countries, mainly from Poland, the Czech Republic, Greece, Germany, Portugal, and Romania.

The data from this research was collected using an online Google survey that was distributed through email accompanied by a brief explanation (with a link that directed to the compilation of a Google form approved by the head of surveyed company) from the 18<sup>th</sup> May till 9<sup>th</sup> June 2022. An online survey was chosen (on a voluntary base) as a means for collecting the data due to the company remote work environment and various locations internationally. As Evans and Mathur (2005) stated the suitable reason to utilize an online survey is when a large sample size is desired over a wide geographical area. It included 46 questions (7 open ended and 39 closed questions) asking IC constructs and remote work experience. Questions were modeled specifically on the areas highlighted in this study that may either mitigate or compound the effects of IC in remote work environment. The compilation time was estimated in approximately 15 minutes. Questionnaire was pre-tested with 3 respondents and redesigned in accordance with it. 5 point-Likert scale to measure satisfaction, positivity or negativity and 3 point-Likert and 5 point-Likert scale to measure agreement has been used.

In order to test seven hypotheses, the authors' set seven dimensions central to IC based on Ruck and Welch (2012) six dimensions. In this study, Pearson's chi-squared test has been used to analyse whether the characteristic values of the first variable are influenced by the characteristic values of the second variable and vice versa. The observed and expected frequency of 0.05 has been given. Statistical analyses were performed using Excel and SPSS.

## 3 RESULTS

As stated previously, this study will focus on the results of those surveyed who expressed some increase or decrease in their levels of internal communication, with discussion of neutral responses where necessary or of relevance to the study. These questions appeared at Questions 15 and 19 (identification), 33 and 35, (workplace relationships), 37 (channel) 42 and 46 (role), 41 and 46 (voice), 10 and 16 (performance), 28 and 37 (support).

IC is receiving focus and organizations are investing in the function (Chalmers, 2008; Helsby, 2009). The main role of IC is to improve corporate values by communicating effectively with the workforce, an important asset, and a sense of belonging.

19) How is your relationship with your colleagues?	15) My feeling of connectedness with my employer / team members				
	Neutral	Positive	Rather negative	Rather positive	Total
Average	42	24	0	0	66
%	63.64	36.36	0.00	0.00	
Extremely satisfied	0	59	7	45	111
%	0.00	53.15	6.31	40.54	
Total	42	83	7	45	177

**Tab. 1** A sense of connection between employees and colleagues.

Source: Authors' work

### 3.1 Identification

- **H1: Relationships with colleagues related to feeling of connectedness with my employer / team members.**

In the question “How is your relationship with your colleagues?” we can only compare the values “Average” and “Extremely satisfied”, since the value “dissatisfied” did not reach a sufficient frequency to participate in the test. Only 1.1% of employees were dissatisfied with their colleagues. Similarly, the choice “Negative” in the question “My sense of connection with the employer/colleagues” did not reach sufficient representation (0.6%), therefore this option cannot be tested.

It is also possible to read from Table No. 1 that we obtained a total of 177 answers to the question, although 182 respondents participated in the questionnaire, and 5 employees refused to answer the question. The test criterion value is 104.043, and the p-value of the test is 0.000. The p-value is lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05, so the dependence between relationships with colleagues and the feeling of connection with employees or team members has been confirmed. According to the table, those who are extremely satisfied with their relationships with colleagues have a statistically significantly higher likelihood of having a positive or rather positive relationship with their colleagues. From this, we can say that when employees feel connected to the company, either because they share the same vision as the company's leaders or because they feel that their co-workers have become like family, they are much less likely to want to look for employment elsewhere and thus are more productive.

Based on this data, fulfilling relationships within the work environment are interlinked with meaningful connections with co-workers. When employees feel connected to one another, they feel better. Connection seems to be the most crucial component because connected teams drive collaboration.

### 3.2 Workplace relationships

- **H2: Daily contact with your team leaders is related to being satisfied with the frequency of communication from leadership.**

More than 4/5 employees confirmed that they communicate with the team leader at least once a day. This majority is also satisfied with the frequency of communication they receive from management. The test criterion value is 156.865 and the p-value of the test is 0.000. The p-value is lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05, so the dependence between daily

contact with team leaders and satisfaction with the frequency of communication with management was confirmed. Those who do not have daily contact with team leaders are also less satisfied with the frequency of communication with management. This means that employees would like to be in contact with management more often (see the Table 2).

Corporate communication is vital element. Generally, communication with team leaders is a big challenge. Leaders typically hold the key to advancement within the organization. The highest managerial goal is to create a pleasant working atmosphere and find the most successful technique of motivating each employee, which is very difficult due to the diversity of employees and different personalities, but in this company this goal would be met.

### 3.3 Channel

- **H3: More than 40% of employees prefer to use Zoom as communication tool.**

Employees' channel preferences vary based on the activity and who they are interacting with. As audio and video communications have become more common in daily lives, people often start collaborations with the question: which video communications platform do you know and like to use? We will test this single hypothesis using the proportion test. The software provides only the p-value in the output. It is equal to 0.0379. It is therefore again smaller than the chosen level of significance, and we have thus managed to confirm that Zoom is the most popular communication channel for more than 40% of employees. In second place, e-mail is preferred by 30.77% of respondents, and the last chat is preferred by 5.49% of employees.

### 3.4 Role

- **H4: Chitchatting related to clarity of objectives.**

More than half (61.7%) of the research participants perceive Zoom as the majority source of information, another 21.7% slightly disagree. The remaining 16.6% of respondents reject this,

33) Do you have daily contact with your team leaders?	35) How satisfied are you with the frequency of communication of leadership?			
	Extremely satisfied	Neutral	Slightly / very satisfied	Total
Mostly disagree	0	0	14	14
%	0.00	0.00	100.00	
Slightly agree	0	0	17	17
%	0.00	0.00	100.00	
Mostly agree	0	25	52	77
%	0.00	32.47	67.53	
Completely agree	56	13	0	69
%	81.16	18.84	0.00	
Total	56	38	83	177

**Tab. 2** Frequency of H2

Source: Authors' work

42) Most of the information is through chitchatting.	46) Are your work objectives clear each day? Each week?			
	Completely / mostly agree	Slightly / mostly agree	Completely agree	Total
Completely/mostly agree	0	21	5	26
%	0.00	80.77	19.23	
Slightly agree	5	34	0	39
%	12.82	87.18	0.00	
Mostly agree	3	18	51	72
%	4.17	25.00	70.83	
Completely agree	0	0	43	43
%	0.00	0.00	100.00	
Total	8	73	99	180

**Tab. 3** Frequency of H4

Source: Authors' work

thus they receive information in another way. A more important finding is that 89% of employees are clear about their assigned daily/weekly tasks. The test criterion value is 108.854 and the p-value of the test is 0.000. The p-value is lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05, so the dependence between communication using chitchatting and understanding the goals every day / week was confirmed. Those who are not satisfied with the course of communication using normal calls are significantly more often not completely clear about the assignment of the task (clarity of goals). On the contrary, those who are very satisfied with informal conversations are clear about their daily goals. The table of observed frequencies are shown in Table 3.

41) Most work-related information from teammates and team leaders to me is transmitted through informal written channels (i.e., instant messages, chat).	46) Are your work objectives clear each day? Each week?			
	Completely / mostly agree	Slightly / mostly agree	Completely agree	Total
Completely / mostly agree	0	27	15	42
%	0.00	64.29	35.71	
Slightly / mostly agree	8	48	53	109
7.34	44.04	48.62		
Completely agree	0	0	31	31
%	0.00	0.00	100	
Total	8	75	99	182

**Tab. 4** Frequency of H5

Source: Authors' work

### 3.5 Voice

- **H5: Communication using informal written channels is related to understanding daily/weekly goals.**

More than half (54.5%) of the participants confirmed that they receive work messages through informal written channels. 22.5% of respondents reject this statement only slightly. 23% mostly and completely disagree. This means that informal communication is accepted as casual communication between co-workers in the workplace. It is unofficial in nature and is based on informal social relationships that are formed in the workplace outside the normal hierarchy of the business structure. The test criterion value is 38.986 and the p-value of the test is 0.000. The p-value is lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05, so the dependence between communication using informal written channels (messages, chats) and the understanding of goals every day/week was confirmed. This type of communication is important in the workplace because it can help with employee morale and encourage a sense of belonging for both employees and clients or customers. Those who are not satisfied with the course of communication using informal written channels are significantly more often not completely clear about the assignment of the task (clarity of goals). On the contrary, those who are very satisfied with informal written communication are clear about their daily goals (see Table 4).

### 3.6 Performance

- **H6: The change in work productivity is related to the fact that employees enjoy remote work.**

With all the modern comforts of home vying for our attention, it would be understandable if employers saw a drop in productivity with remote workers. However, the opposite is true. In fact, 88% of employees seem to enjoy working remotely, with another 6.6% slightly disagreeing with this statement and 5.4% rejecting it. Almost half (49.5%) of respondents say their productivity has increased as a result of working from home. Only 7.1% of employees feel a decrease in work performance. The test criterion value is 137.556 and the p-value of the test is 0.000. The p-value is lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05, so the dependence between productivity and whether employees enjoy remote work has been confirmed. From Table 5, it can be said that those who enjoy working remotely increased their productivity significantly more often than those who did not enjoy working remotely.

### 3.7 Support

- **H7: The choice of the preferred communication channel is related to the number of requests for help.**

A somewhat disturbing finding emerged for the last hypothesis, where 27.1% of employees have difficulty asking for help. So, it seems that the open-door policy is only partially working. Workplaces reflect norms and standards set by management, which are then accepted (or not). Much of this depends on how these norms are enforced and demonstrated. Building a culture of helping is about the art of practicing what you preach. In this hypothesis, we tested whether these concerns are related to the communication channel. The test criterion value is 64.086 and the p-value of the test is 0.000. The p-value is lower than the chosen significance level of 0.05, thus the dependence between communication channel and concern about asking for help is confirmed. From Table 6, it can be seen that those who prefer chat as their communication channel are significantly more often not afraid to ask for help than those who use Zoom or e-mail.



10) I enjoy working remotely.	16) Has your work productivity changed when you have started work remotely?			
	Decreased	Increased	Same	Total
Completely / mostly disagree	0	5	5	10
%	0.00	0.00	50.00	
Slightly / mostly agree	0	10	74	84
7.34	0.00	11.90	88.10	
Completely agree	13	75	0	88
%	14.77	85.23	0.00	
Total	13	90	79	182

**Tab. 5** Frequency of H6

Source: Authors' work

The authors' survey results confirm that it is increasingly important for IC professionals to consider the diversity of the internal team in the organization, as highlighted in previous research (Suh and Lee, 2016; Yeomans and FitzPatrick, 2017). Additionally, as highlighted by McQuail (2010) effective communication requires delivering the right channel, the right message, to the right audience, through the right channel at the right time.

The received data from the first hypothesis is in the vein of past studies that highlight that overall organizational efficacy and efficiency depend on its IC (Grimshaw and Mike, 2008; Hayase, 2009). Communication plays an essential role (Levinson, 1980) as further demonstrated. Interestingly, those who do not have daily contact with team leaders are also less satisfied with the frequency of communication with management. This means that employees would like to be in contact with management more often as confirmed by H2. Because as Men and

37) What communication channels work best for you.	28) I feel uncomfortable asking other for help?					
	Completely disagree	Mostly disagree	Slightly agree	Mostly agree	Completely agree	Total
Zoom	14	21	21	29	29	114
%	12.28	18.42	18.42	25.44	25.44	
E-mail	12	31	1	8	14	66
7.34	18.18	46.97	1.52	12.12	21.21	
Chat	12	20	3	0	1	36
%	33.33	55.56	8.33	0.00	2.78	
Undefined	3	12	8	0	8	31
%	9.68	38.71	25.81	0.00	25.81	
Total	41	84	33	37	52	247

**Tab. 6** Frequency of H7

Source: Authors' work



Yue (2019) explained communication increases stakeholder awareness and satisfaction with what leaders are making and whether their decisions will mitigate tension and improve interpersonal relationships. Almost identical to Stauss and Hoffmann (2000) who stated that IC is practiced through top-down, bottom-up or horizontal communication. IC without internal communication digital channels does not work (Smith et al., 2015). Zoom is the most popular communication channel for more than 40% of employees. In second place, e-mail is preferred by 30.77% of respondents, and the last chat is preferred by 5.49% of employees. Almost similar to Friedl and Verčič (2011) who noted that millennial workforce prefer traditional media. This means that without these channels, it is impossible to match employees to the company priorities, goals and promote creativity. The difference between formal and informal communication lies in the material, not the instrument (Rodrigues et al., 2016; Welch and Jackson 2007). But, based on H4 and H5 data, those who are very satisfied with informal conversations and informal written communications are clear about their daily goals. Identical to Men (2014) who highlighted that the choice of medium for communication is important. According to Bočková and Lajčín (2021) job satisfaction, productivity, engagement and, with mandatory remote working during this pandemic, is more of a challenge for employers than ever before. Thus, H6 confirmed that those who enjoy working remotely increased their productivity significantly more often than those who did not enjoy working remotely. Similar to Dhanesh and Picherit-Duthler (2021) who highlight that social connection mediated the relationship between new ways of working and employee engagement. A somewhat disturbing finding emerged for the last hypothesis, where 27.1% of employees have difficulty asking for help. Probably, because as Zhao and Epley (2022) indicated those needing help consistently underestimated others' willingness to help, underestimated how positively helpers would feel, and overestimated how inconvenienced helpers would feel. Possible tool seems to be the modern technology because those who prefer chat as their communication channel are significantly more often not afraid to ask for help than those who use Zoom or e-mail. This result is in the vein of Jämsen et al. (2022) statement that communication technology played a crucial role in experiences. Obtained results confirm that "the most important driving force behind the modern economy today is creative, innovative and motivated employees" (Pilukienė, 2017, p. 223).

## 4 CONCLUSION

IC in the surveyed organization is viewed as important and as a specific segment within each element or task. There are several target groups. Firstly, managers, leaders and executives who are responsible for shaping organizational culture and strategies, especially policies for remote work. Secondly, human resource professionals as well as external communication specialists who design IC strategies and implement them within the company. Further, there are researchers and academics who study work dynamics and IC in remote environment. Finally, policymakers suggesting regulations for e-workers at the level of governments or the European Union.

Obtained data confirms the raising importance of IC, especially in times of crisis as employees considered as a homogenous.

The following research questions were outlined:

- How e-employees perceive IC methods in their organization?
- They perceived IC as being tailored to their specific needs. But based on the data, it still invites us to re-consider the specific needs to adapt the content of the messages, their formats, and the best communication channels to these needs. E-employees who perceive communication as transparent are satisfied by the communication in their organization. It means that organization partly created an effective IC strategy. It has to be prepared and ready to react to sudden changes and circumstances. Creating an effective IC strategy

involves evaluating and reviewing the current strategy and identifying the strengths and weaknesses as demonstrated in the research data. Especially when employees are reluctant to ask for assistance.

- Which of the internal communication channels were used most effectively?
- Technology tools affect how e-workers feel about their organization and work. Communication is the most important predictor of feelings of value and engagement. Both formal and informal IC channels are the way by which e-employees communicate and connect. Zoom is the most popular communication channel for more than 40% of employees. In second place, e-mail is preferred by 30.77% of respondents, and the last chat is preferred by 5.49% of employees. E-mail seems not to be the most common way of connecting in the office anymore.

The study has found that the largest proportion of staff was positively affected in the areas of IC. There are recommendations to support IC within the surveyed company:

1. Enhance relationships among e-colleagues – to encourage meaningful connections among e-workers through regular team-building activities and collaborative projects. Strengthening their relationships will enhance their sense of community with the company, reducing turnover rates and increasing productivity. They will feel more connected and more likely to cooperate effectively, which lead to higher performance and job satisfaction.
2. Increase daily contact with team leaders – to ensure that team leaders have daily check-ins with their teams through brief meetings or casual conversations to keep communication lines open. Regular interaction helps to solve issues promptly, employee feel valued, which influences overall engagement and productivity.
3. Clarify objectives – support informal communication methods like casual chats or informal meetings to discuss daily and weekly goals because when employees understand their tasks, their productivity is higher and reducing errors.
4. Build a culture of support – promote a company culture where asking for help is encouraged and normalized. It can be achieved through training programs and clear communication from leadership side about the importance of seeking support. Asking for help can prevent burnout. Employees who feel support they are more engaged and loyal to the company.

The difference pre- and post-COVID-19 is that e-working shows that, if this ground work can be laid, value-enhancing, high skilled work can be done in terms of behaviours that matter for sustainability.

Regarding the limitations of this research, we can underline that the sample of our survey only concerned employees from organization based in Greece but located various European countries and in a context of unprecedented crisis. Authors were limited in studying certain fields on more detail. Additionally, the spoken predominant language in organization was English and it may cause problems of understanding and interpretation of sets of questions. This research only explores the role of IC in an organizational context (formal, casual, organized, or unplanned).

For future research, it would be interesting to extend this research by conducting a qualitative study. Other studies could aim to add more companies in different sectors. Future research may focus on the implications of feedback in IC.

## Acknowledgements

The scientific paper was written within the framework of the projects KEGA 123PU-4/2023 and KEGA 065UK-4/2024 with title The Use of Artificial Intelligence in Human Resource Management.

This paper was supported by the project CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16\_017/0002334 Research Infrastructure for Young Scientists, this is co-financed from Operational Programme Research, Development and Education.

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