Engaging Employees During a Pandemic Crisis – A Study of Internal Crisis Communication in Organizations

Evelin Bakó

Haaga-Helia
University of Applied Sciences

Abstract

16.9.2020

Author(s) Evelin Bakó	
Degree programme Business Service Solutions and Languages	
Report/thesis title Engaging Employees During a Pandemic Crisis – A Study of Internal Crisis Communication in Organizations	**Number of pages and appendix pages** 43+8

On the 11th of March, 2020 the World Health Organization announced the new coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic. The spread of the disease has caused one of the toughest lockdowns ever seen around the world and pushed leaders and organizations of all sizes into a communication challenge. Managers did not only have to inform their teams about the changes the new situation brought to work life but also, they had to find new ways to engage their employees and team members virtually.

This study focuses on examining organization's internal communication effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic and explores how managers and team leaders engaged their employees during the crisis. For this purpose, communication concepts are defined, and existing theory related to crisis management, crisis communication and employee engagement are explored. To support the relevance of this research, quantitative surveys with employees of various public and private sector organizations are conducted and analyzed.

The research findings indicate that the workload of managers has rather increased during the pandemic. In contrast, employees in non-managerial positions indicated a decrease in their workload. Findings indicate that employees were satisfied with where, and how their organization communicated with them during the pandemic, but they were unsatisfied with the frequency of information delivery. Employees wished that their organization would have informed them faster and more frequently about the changes the pandemic brought to the work life.

The results of the survey show that most employees didn't receive clear directions from their supervisors during the pandemic. The most common communication challenges employees faced with their supervisors were the obscurity of goals and priorities, loss of information and decrease in team spirit.

Organizations are recommended to encourage their managers to allow flexibility even more during crisis times. Team leaders and supervisors are recommended to put more effort into keeping up the team spirit during a crisis as it is highly contributing to employees' engagement. Virtual coffee and lunch breaks, online birthday celebrations, or Friday quizzes are some ideas for online activities team leaders can implement within their groups. For some teams, a co-created playlist can help to stay connected with colleagues through music. Team leaders of all companies are recommended to be consistent with rewards and recognition even during a crisis. Similarly, managers are recommended to schedule informal check-ins with their team members to collect and give feedback.

Keywords
Internal Communication, Crisis Communication, Employee Engagement, COVID-19

Table of contents

1   Introduction

On the 11th of March, 2020 the World Health Organization announced the new coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic. The disease that has spread widely all around the world, caused one of the toughest lockdowns ever seen in Europe. Governments declared a state of emergency, closing all schools, theaters, museums, libraries, swimming pools, many airports, and ban gatherings of more than 10 people.

The situation pushed leaders and organizations of all sizes into a communication challenge. Governments, public and private sector CEO's, team leaders and small entrepreneurs did not just have to inform their teams about the changes the new situation brought to work life but also, they had to find new ways to engage their employees and team members virtually.

Events like a pandemic present dramatic consequence for health and safety, as well as business continuity and post-event recovery which could result in lost revenue and damages. That's why it is important for any organization to be prepared and have a strategically planned crisis communication messaging – not only about health and safety related matters but also obtaining to every major aspect of business and organizational functioning that will be affected (Scott, 2020). When crisis communication is ineffective, so is the crisis management effort (Timothy, 2015).

Previous crisis communication research has examined external crisis communication, for example the crisis response strategies applied by organizations to protect their reputation and restore their image among external stakeholders in a crisis situation (Sturges, 1994; Coombs, & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007). This study focuses on examining the internal communication strategies of organizations during a crisis. The objective of this thesis is to examine organization's internal communication effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic and explore how managers and team leaders engaged their employees during the crisis. For this purpose, communication concepts are defined (chapter 2) and existing theory related to crisis management, crisis communication and employee engagement are explored (chapter 3). To support the relevance of this research, quantitative surveys with employees of various public and private sector organizations are conducted and analyzed. With the help of this thesis employers can reach better understanding on how their communicative choices will impact their employees' engagement during a crisis and will help managers to make informed choices about internal crisis communication.

The main findings of the thesis are reflected on the final chapter (6). The aim of this paper is to offer development ideas for managers and serve as a ground for organizations who

can conduct training programs for their managers to develop their internal crisis communication efforts to elevate its positive consequences.

This thesis is written based on information collected from academic studies, academic journals, books and conducted researches. The theoretical framework aims to give an explanation to the following terms: communication, crisis management, crisis communication, pandemic and employee engagement.

The paper includes an empirical research conducted in several public and private sector organizations. The empirical research is based on a quantitative survey conducted with employees of various international companies and public/private sector organizations. To be able to see the big picture, and avoid industry-specific biases, the author chose to conduct a quantitative survey of employees and managers of any organization that´s workforce has been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. This allowed the author to gather data from all sizes of companies from various industries and be able to compare them to each other. To see both the leader's and the employees' perspective, the author conducted a survey targeting all levels of an organizational chart. This allowed her to hear both sides of the discussion and increase representativeness. The analysis of the surveys, and the conclusion is drawn in the last chapter of the thesis.

The aim of this study is to give a better understanding for employers on how their communicative choices impact their employees' engagement during a crisis and will help managers to make informed choices about crisis communication. At the end of the paper, the author extracted key lessons from the research to develop a set of guidelines employers and managers can use to impact their internal crisis communication efforts.

2   Theoretical framework – Communication as a concept

In order to improve internal communication in organizations, we first have to understand what it means and what does this concept include. The first part of this paper will introduce communication and internal communication as a concept to further understand research needs and to give a basis for this paper.

2.1   Definition of Communication

Cambridge Academic Dictionary (2020) defines communication as "the process by which messages and information is sent from one place or person to another, or the message itself. Communication is also the exchange of information and the expression of feeling that can result in understanding." This definition describes the general understanding of communication between two human beings, which is also the way how employers perceive it on a daily basis. It is the exchange of information, including feelings, though a medium, be it in a verbal or a non-verbal form.

Now let's take a look on a more detailed definition of communication:
"Communication is a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, in which participants not only exchange (encode-decode) information, news, ideas and feelings but also create and share meaning. In general communication is a means of connecting people or places. In business, it is a key function of management – an organization cannot operate without communication between levels, departments and employees" (WebFinance, 2020a). This definition suggests that communication is a two-way process, meaning that there is always more than one party involved in the procedure. The process of communication includes encoding and decoding information, pointing out that one party develops (encodes) and sends the message to the other party, who then interprets (decodes) that to turn them into thoughts. The above-mentioned definition also emphasizes the importance of communication which ultimately, connects people or places, and helps organizations function effectively.

2.2   Internal Communication

WebFinance (2020b) defines internal communication as "the sharing of information **within an organization for business purposes**." According to this definition there are two important aspects of internal communication:

1. **The location of communication:** In internal communication the exchange of information happens within an organization, suggesting that the encoder and decoder are participants of the same organization.
2. **The purpose of communication:** The purpose of internal communication is sending and receiving information that is relevant to the business and the organization's operations. Exchange of information that is irrelevant regarding the organization is not considered internal communication by this definition.

Internal communication can also be defined as the management function that is in charge of communication within an organization. It is a versatile managerial and technical function that integrates elements of communication, marketing and human resource management (T. Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012). According to this definition, internal communication is a separate function and/or department within organizations that serve a specific purpose of the business. According to T. Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh (2012, 225) one of the purposes of internal communication is aligning the goals of individual employees to organizational goals thus, helping organizations build strong cultures. Other tasks of internal communication include motivating and engaging employees and distributing information within the organization in the most efficient way possible (T. Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012, 225).

If we look at internal communication as a management function, we can see that it plays an important role in organizations by serving multiple purposes at the same time. Internal communication creates a structure of information flow within the organization by distributing information among different levels and departments. It also serves a broader purpose as effective information flow is necessary to align the organization's goals to individual employee's goals.

2.3 Directions of Communication in an organization

Information can flow in different directions within organizations. Depending on the positions of the senders and receivers in the organizational chart, there are vertical and horizontal directions of communication.

1. Vertical communication

   Vertical communication is where the information or messages flow between subordinates and superiors (Bartels, Peters, Jong, Pruyn, Van der Mollen 2010). Vertical communication is divided to two subsections according to the sender-receiver relationship.

a. Top-down communication: It is the communication of the management to the employees. This type of communication can be used to communicate company vision, strategy and operational instructions to the employees (Bartels et al. 2010).

b. Bottom-up communication: It is the information sent from employees to the management. This type of communication can be used to create opportunities for employees to participate in decision making. (Bartels et al. 2010)

2. Horizontal communication

Horizontal communication is the exchange of information between individuals or groups on the same level of hierarchy. This type of communication is often task-related but can be informal and unrelated to work as well (Bartels et al. 2010).

According to a research that studied employee's perceived organizational support as a mediator between relational exchange, employees experience various relationships at the workplace but two of them dominate the employees' professional life: the relationship with their organization and the relationship with their direct supervisor (Sluss, Klimchak, & Holmes 2008).

2.4 Leader Member Exchange – LMX

The LMX theory (Wayne, Liden, Sparrowe 1994) is an important element of communication in organizations, which describes a dyadic relationship between subordinates and supervisors. Leaders use different set of behaviours and styles when dealing with different employees, resulting in either high or low quality LMX.
High quality LMX is referred to as a mutually beneficial relationship involving trust and support of the other party. Low quality LMX is based solely on the fulfilment of the job.

Wayne et al. (1994) pointed out that employees involved in high quality LMX have a significantly better relationship with their supervisors than those involved in low-quality LMX. High quality LMX is manifested in greater access to information, opportunities for future growth and greater job satisfaction. According to Wayne et al. (1994) the quality of LMX is established fairly early in a relationship and tends to stay stable throughout the duration of it.

2.5 Communication Channels

In order to ensure effective communication at a workplace, there are different channels that can be used. The most common channels are the following:

1. Face to face meetings

   Personal meetings, team briefings and face to face communication with direct managers are the most preferred ways of communication by employees. This form of communication is considered to be the richest as it allows non-verbal messaging and immediate feedback between participants (Men, L.R. 2014).

2. E-mail

   Technological development has made e-mail an inevitable part of employees' daily routine. This channel is a preferred communication channel by employees as it allows quick information exchange and it is not dependent on a place or time. However, e-mail lacks information richness and the ability to strongly influence employees (Men, L.R. 2014).

3. Phone

   Phone and/or voice messaging is the third most preferred channel by employees when it comes to communicating with their direct managers/supervisors. This channel allows immediate feedback but lacks non-verbal cues (Men, L.R. 2014).

4. Social Media

   Organizational social media channels promote employee engagement, facilitate conversation between employees and the organization and encourage employees to give voice to their opinions (Men, L.R. 2014).

The empirical part of this thesis aims to investigate how much the above-mentioned channels were preferred/used by employees during the Covid-19 pandemic. Besides the above-mentioned channels, the author aims to examine the preference of several other virtual channels, such as Microsoft Teams, Slack and organizational Intranet.

Microsoft Teams is a cloud-based team collaboration software, with core capabilities such as business messaging, calling and file sharing (Rouse, 2020). Slack is a digital messaging program designed for use in the workplace, that can help colleagues keep in touch, plan schedules, share files and stay connected (Steven, 2020). Intranets are private organizational networks that distribute communications exclusively to their workforce.

Intranets are predominantly used by employees to search for information, communicate across an organization, and manage workflows (Chow, 2019).

2.6 The importance of communication at a workplace

The definition of communication in subchapter 2.1 indicates that exchanging information can result in understanding, which is an important part of work life. Being able to understand others and make ourselves be understood can help us to do our job effectively and rise productivity. According to Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang (2014) effective workplace communication is important for the following reasons:

1. Creates job satisfaction: Organizations that and foster open communication and encourage their employees to communicate their ideas, feedbacks, and concerns, face lesser employee turnover. Effective workplace communication motivates employees to work better and make them feel more valued in the organization.

2. Lesser conflicts: Workplace conflicts can be easily resolved and/or avoided by open and clear communication and discussions, that can lead to professional and personal growth.

3. Increases productivity: In an organization, people from different social and professional background come together to work for the same goals and set of visions. In order for employees to be able to deliver to the best of their abilities, it is important that the organization clearly defines and communicates its goals, objectives and vision. It leads to better deliverance of work and increased productivity.

4. Formation of relationships: Open communication at a workplace leads to the formation of personal and professional relationships, that can make employees feel cared and valued for, making it more likely that they remain loyal to the organization.

5. Proper utilization of resources: Miscommunication between staff members can cause problems, conflicts or crisis within an organization. This can lead to unnecessary delays of work and ultimately, the wastage of resources. Effective workplace communication is essential to properly utilize resources and increase productivity.

According to Sluss, Kilmchack & Holmes (2008) the employees' relationship with their organization and with their direct supervisor dominates the employees' professional life. Bartels, Peters, Jong, Pruyn, and Van der Mollen (2010) challenged this hypothesis in their study, stating that "dimensions of vertical communication are important predictors of employee's organizational identification whereas dimensions of horizontal communication dominate employees' professional identification." These two studies show that whether it's horizontal or vertical communication, communication is undoubtedly an important element of employees' life as it creates job satisfaction, help employees form relationships and takes part in building employees organizational and professional identification.

3 Internal Crisis Communication during a pandemic

3.1 Organizational crisis

In order to understand different crisis communication practices, we have to define the meaning of organizational crisis.

According to T. Coombs (2015) organizational crisis is "the **perception** of an **unpredictable** event that threatens important **expectancies of stakeholders** related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues and can **seriously impact** an organization's performance and generate **negative outcomes**." This definition shows us 5 vital elements of organizational crisis.

1) A crisis is perceptual

   Not all incidents and occurrences within an organization can be defined as crisis. Crises are events that stakeholders perceive as such. Stakeholders are people or groups who can affect or can be affected by an organization. A crisis comes to existence when stakeholders believe that the organization in fact, is in a crisis.

2) A crisis is unpredictable

   The timing of a crisis is unpredictable but for wise organizations, the occurrence of a crisis is not unexpected. They know that it will happen, they just don't know when. Crises strike suddenly, giving an element of surprise and uncertainty.

3) It violates stakeholders' expectations

   When a crisis occurs, it contravenes expectations of stakeholders about how an organization should act. When crises disturb some stakeholder expectations – related to e.g. health, safety, environmental, or economic concerns – it can threaten the relationship between stakeholders and the organization.

4) A crisis has a serious impact

   What differentiates crises from other incidents is the significance of their impact. An incident is a minor, localized disruption while a crisis impacts and disrupts the entire organization.

5) A crisis can create negative outcomes

   Crises have the likelihood of creating undesirable outcomes for organizations, their stakeholders and their industries. Negative outcomes can be for example financial losses, injuries, deaths of stakeholders, structural and property damage, brand and reputation damage and environmental harm.

3.2   Pandemic

An organizational crisis can come to life in many forms. This research focuses on only one specific crisis that hit many businesses and organizations worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic. To gain a better understanding on how this crisis impacted organizations, we have to understand the definition of pandemic in general.

The World Health Organization (2010) defines pandemic as "the worldwide spread of a new disease. An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus emerges and spreads around the world, and most people do not have immunity."

3.2.1   The COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is the worldwide spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2020). The virus and the outbreak were first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The World Health Organization declared the outbreak to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020 and recognized it as pandemic on 11 March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). As of 31 March 2020, more than 725,000 cases of COVID-19 have been reported in over 190 countries and territories (JHU CCSE, 2020).

According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the virus can be caught mainly during close physical human contact and by respiratory droplets produced when people cough of sneeze. People can also catch COVID-19 by touching contaminated surface and then their face. Recommended preventive measures include frequent hand washing with soap, maintaining distance from other people and self-isolation for people who suspect they are infected (WHO, 2020).

During the pandemic, governments all around the world announced efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including for example, travel restrictions, quarantines, event cancellations, facility closures and curfews. This caused disruptions in many industries, such as for example in education, tourism, retail or healthcare.

3.2.2   Impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on organizations

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook (2020) refers to the disruptions and the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic as the Great Lockdown, which is described as "the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression."

As discussed in chapter 3.1, a crisis comes unexpectedly, has significant impact on the entire organization, disturbs stakeholders' expectations related to safety, health or economic concerns and can cause negative outcomes. In the following, we will look into the education industry as an example on how have organizations been affected by the pandemic and how it displays the main characteristics of organizational crises.

One of the affected industries of the pandemic is education. According to the data released by UNESCO (2020b) school and university closures were implemented nationwide in 184 countries. Including localized closures, this affects over 1.5 billion students worldwide. Educational institutes all over the world have to adapt to the closures and take measurements on how to keep operating. For example, many institutions shifted to virtual teaching, which required purchasing of new tools, training of staff and students and implementation of new strategies for continuous operations.

In terms of education, stakeholder is someone who has an interest in the success and the welfare of the education system. This includes all parties that are directly or indirectly affected by the success or failure of the school or education system, such as school board members, administrators, teachers, students, parents as well as government officials and state representatives. As local schools educate future employees, business owners and community leaders, the whole community is considered to be the stakeholder in its education system (Roundy, 2016).

The impacts of the pandemic on the education industry manifest several characteristics of crises, defined in chapter 3.1. School closures around the world have *disrupted* the expectancies and *seriously impacted* school administrations, students, teachers and parents as *unexpected* arrangements had to be made in order to guarantee the success of the education system. Working parents are more likely to miss work in order to take care of their children in home school, which caused wage losses and a negative impact on productivity (UNESCO, 2020a). Students with limited access to technology and those with disadvantages experience an interruption in learning and a loss of opportunities for growth and development. The pandemic had numerous other *negative outcomes* on the education industry's stakeholders, such as e.g. poor nutrition of youth who rely on free or discounted school meals, confusion and stress of teachers who transited to distance learning platforms to ensure their obligations and unpreparedness of parents who were asked to facilitate the learning of children at home. (UNESCO, 2020a)

Alongside with industry specific disruptions, the social distancing measurements have also impacted the place of work life. Many organizations have switched to remote working and companies across the world have implemented expanded telecommuting arrangements for their employees in order to stop the virus from spreading. According to a survey by Taloustutkimus, more then 75% of employed people in Finland have been working entirely from home as of April 2020. Additionally, more than 8% of the respondents have been working from home more than before (Statista, 2020).

3.3   Crisis Management

In the previous chapter we examined the definition of crisis and the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic crisis on organizations. Now let's take a look on how can we oversee a crisis like this.

Coombs (2010) defines crisis management as "the set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damages inflicted." As crisis management seeks to decrease the negative outcomes of a crisis it also aims to defend the organization and its stakeholders from damage (Coombs, 2010).

Crisis management is a process that can be divided into three categories.
1. Pre-crisis: The earliest phase, including the efforts to prevent crises and to prepare for crises management.
2. Crisis: It is the response to an actual event.
3. Post-crisis: This phase involves the efforts to learn from the crisis.

Each phase of crisis management has its own demand for collecting and sharing information. Using the three phases of crisis management, it is possible to identify various types of crisis communication (Coombs, 2010).

3.4   Crisis Communication Defined

Communication is critical throughout the entire crisis management process. Crisis communication is defined as the collection, processing and circulation of information required to address a crisis situation (Coombs, 2010).
The three phases of crisis management have their own demands for different communication efforts. In pre-crisis, crisis communication involves the collection of information about crisis risks, decision making about managing potential crises as well as training of personnel who will be involved in the crisis management process. In the second

phase – during the actual crisis – crisis communication includes the collection of information for decision making as well as the creation and distribution of crisis messages to people outside of the crisis team. Post-crisis communication aims to evaluate the crisis management effort and arranges follow-up messages as needed (Coombs, 2010).

The second phase of crisis communication, known as the crisis response, is the most heavily researched area of crisis communication. Crisis responses are highly visible to stakeholders and improper crisis response can make the situation worse (Coombs, 2010). The crisis outcome, as well as possible reputational damages of the organization are highly affected by what and how an organization communicates during the crisis. Therefore, this study focuses merely on the second phase of crisis management and examines different dimensions of the actual crisis response within organizations.

3.5   Internal Crisis Communication

Previous research hardly provides a straightforward definition for internal crisis communication. In the past decades, researchers focused mainly on the external dimensions of crisis communication, in particular the communication efforts applied by organizations to protect and restore their reputation among external stakeholders (Sturges, 1994; Coombs, & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007).

The best way to start examining the definition of internal crisis communication is by looking at the different sender-receiver relationships in the three stages of crises. According to Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2011) employees and the management of an organization can serve both as senders and as receivers during each stages of a crisis (Figure 2).

When **employees serve as receivers** (1) and the management team as senders, the purpose of messaging is varying according to the crisis management stages:
1) In the pre-stage the focus of messaging is on the prevention of the crisis as well as on the strengthening of psychological crisis preparedness. Main messages include risks, stakes and issues as well as crisis management policies and guidelines (Figure 2).
2) During a crisis event the goal of internal communication is to handle the crisis and protect the trust and confidence among employees. The main focus is on communicating the relevant instructions and information (Figure 2).
3) The post-crisis stage aims to serve as a learning process. The main messages are about the new knowledge and post-crisis changes (Figure 2).

	PRECRISIS STAGE	CRISIS EVENT	POSTCRISIS STAGE
Focal point	*To prevent* *To prepare*	*To handle the crisis* *To make sense*	*To learn* *To change*
(1) Employees as *receivers* Management or crisis management team as senders Other types of senders outside the organization	Communication of risks, issues and stakes Communication that strengthens the psychological crisis-preparedness Communication of the crisis management plan (policies and guidelines)	Communication of relevant instructions and information Handling of reactions to the crisis and sense making Protection/restoration of the trust and confidence among employees Crisis auto-communication	Communication of new knowledge (organizational learning and memory) Communication of post-crisis changes Discourse of renewal Memorials
	(3) Horizontal communication among managers and among employees		
(2) Employees as *senders* Management or crisis management team as receivers Other types of receivers outside the organization	Negative upward communication through the line (whistle blowers, dissenters)	Communication of reactions to the crisis Positive and/or negative organizational "ambassadors"	Organizational storytelling
Organizational factors having a positive or negative influence	Crisis type (content, intensity, dynamics and interpretation) Cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to a crisis (such as anger, stress, grief, and betrayal) Crisis culture • Safety and error culture • Psychological defense mechanisms • Crisis perception • Crisis memory • Collective mindfulness Communication culture or climate Communication strategy		

Figure 2. Sub-areas within the field of internal crisis communication. Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2011)

When **employees serve as senders** (2) and the management team as receivers the purpose of the messaging is different in each stage:

1) In the pre-crisis stage, the purpose of messaging can be e.g. objection or rejection and so-called whistle blowers and dissenters can appear on the scene (Figure 2).
2) During the actual crisis, employees react to the crisis and according to that, they can serve either as good or bad organizational ambassadors (Figure 2.)
3) After the crisis, the purpose of messaging is to tell a story about the organization (Figure 2).

Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2011) have also distinguished between (3) other types of senders outside of the organizations and (4) other types of receivers outside of the

organization (Figure 2). For instance, the media belongs to the former sub-category, as it has the ability to create verbal and visual picture of the organization, that can affect employees' behavior and communication about their workplace. Informal networks of employees, such as family, friends, colleagues and their use of social media belongs to the latter sub-category. Employees often communicate within these networks, thus, internal communication is not only the communication that remains under the organization's roof, but it also means the circulation of external "leaked-in", and internal "leaked-out" information due to different stakeholder roles, communicative practices and social networks crossing organizational boundaries (Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W., 2011).

After analyzing the sub-areas within the field of internal crisis communication, we can point out that internal crisis communication is not only when the managers of an organization communicate to the employees of the organization. Internal crisis communication also incorporates situations where the employees communicate inside the organization with each other, or to the management. Internal crisis communication even comprises situations where the employees interpret the organization's external crisis communication and make sense of the crisis response strategies used by the organization's managers or public relations officers (Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W., 2011).

3.6 The Influence of Internal Communication on Employee engagement

Ruck and Welch (2012) states that internal communication that involves effective exchange of information often result in commitment and engagement from the employees towards the organization. Ruck and Welch have developed a model that seeks to explain employee engagement together with internal communication (Figure 3). The model conceptualizes engagement as an outcome of internal communication and specifies employee voice and identification as critical components for engagement. The model comprises the importance of employees' voice, based on being well informed together with organizational support and identification. It also highlights performance feedback and individual (job) communication needs of employees. (Figure 3).
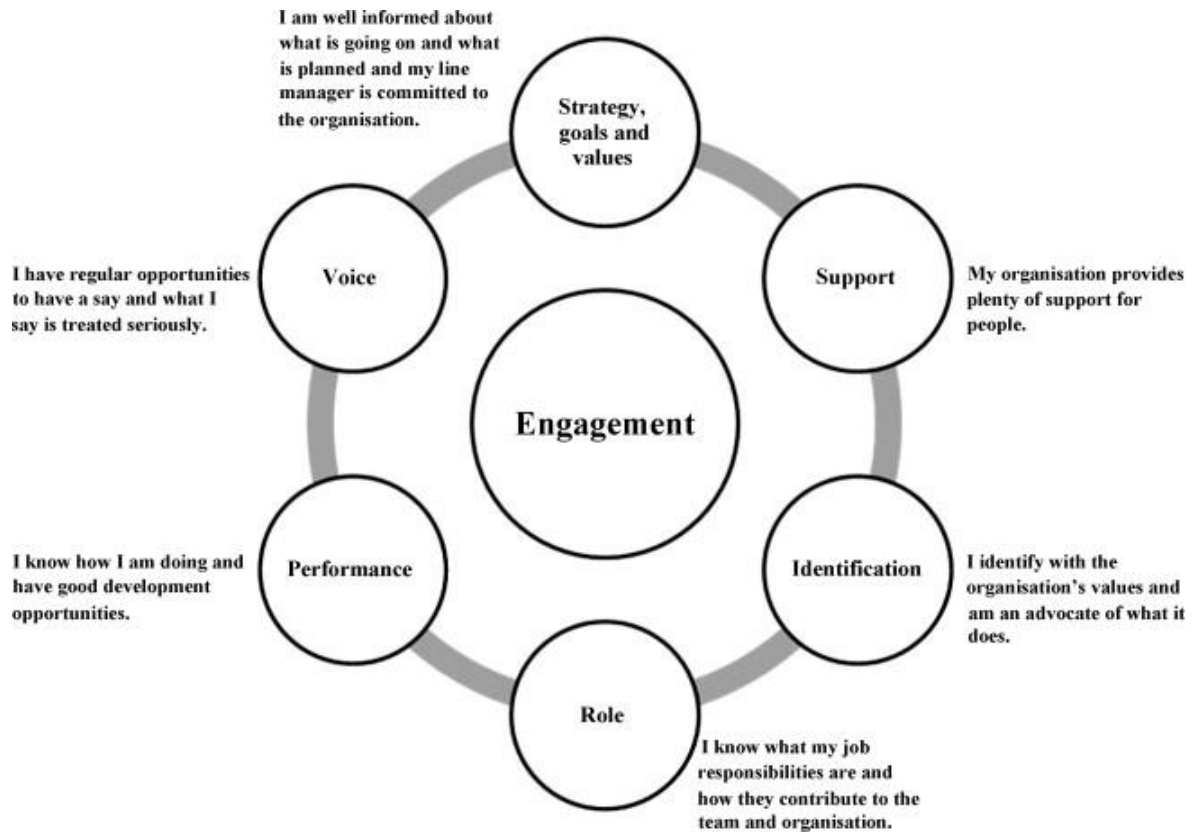
Figure 3. Engagement model by Ruck & Welch (2012)

3.7 Employee Engagement During a Crisis

Employee engagement is significant for an organization, because it is related to the longevity of a company as well as the productivity of its employees (Osborne and Hammoud, 2017). This has an impact on the financial outcome of the organization. However, employee engagement is crucial even beyond that: The feeling of proficiency and being needed and valued by the organization are psychological needs that increase individual behavior to maintain psychological health. This leads to a cycle of growth in each individual (Osborne and Hammoud, 2017).

Understanding the value of employee engagement during a crisis situation is important as well. According to Dr. Beena (2014), having an efficient staff becomes the building block that can save organizations during crisis. In her research paper, Dr. Beena builds a model based on employee engagement that can facilitate effective crisis management in organizations.
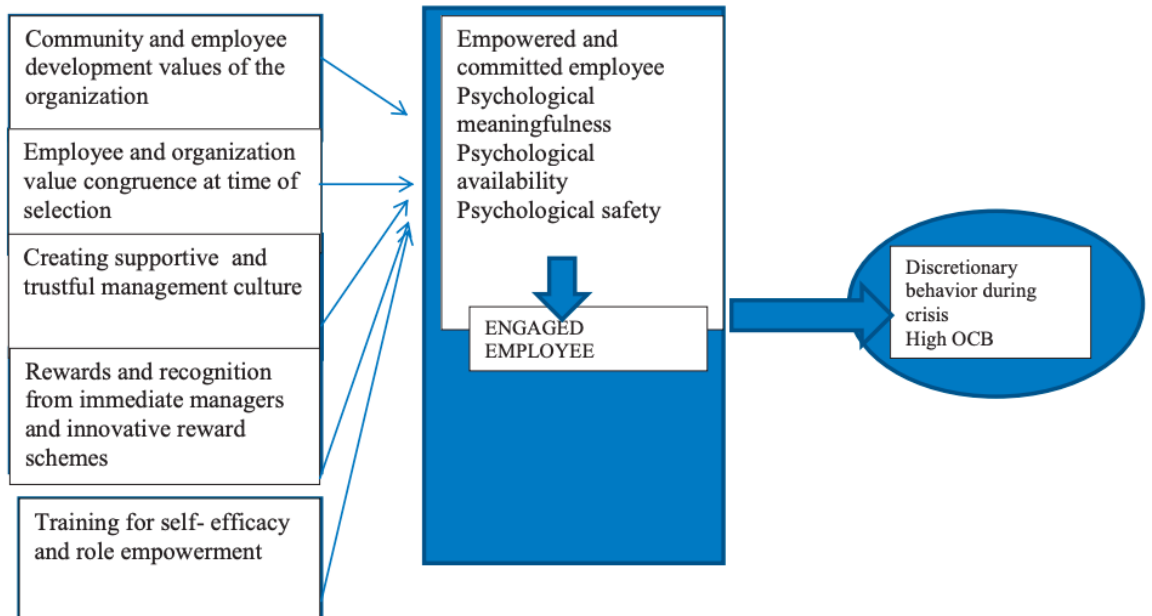
Figure 4. Employee engagement model for crisis situations (Beena, 2014).

According to the model, the very first step is identifying your own organizations' values and selecting employees who can understand and exhibit those values. Understanding the values of an organization while at the same time, having supportive managers makes employees identify their self with their roles, which creates more psychological availability at work. Having individual values aligned with organizational values brings in a greater organizational identification and commitment among the employees and the employee develops a sense of communality purpose with the organization. The next step is providing empowerment and training for employees to make decisions and giving recognition by immediate managers. This organizational support will increase employees' self-efficacy which can enhance their cognitive and emotional faculty to undertake the work with full commitment. In times of crisis this is important, because employees become more confident due to their high self-efficacy and psychological feeling of support given by their managers. Due to this, they tend to exhibit discretionary behaviors that can support and benefit the organization in times of crisis. Creating engaged employees is in the hands of the management and supervisors (Beena, 2014).

4 Empirical Research

The aim of this thesis is to examine organization's internal communication effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic and explore how managers and team leaders have engaged their employees during the crisis. The study is interested to discover which factors of internal crisis communication has been successful and effective during the pandemic. It also aims to find out which factors have led to challenges and how managers/supervisors can keep employees engaged during a pandemic crisis.

The main purpose of the study is defined as: "How internal crisis communication can be improved?" In this research the author is also finding out the answers to the following sub questions:

- How employees perceived the internal crisis communication in companies during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis?
- Which communication channels were used, and which were preferred by the employees?
- How satisfied employees were with their manager's communication and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis?

To answer these research questions the author will research and analyze employee's satisfaction with the internal communication practices their organization used, as well as employees' satisfaction with their supervisor's/manager's communication during the pandemic.

4.1 Quantitative approach

The research was conducted as empirical research as the wanted findings were much dependent on personal experiences. The author of this thesis has chosen quantitative research method.
Quantitative approach is useful as it helps the researcher to prevent bias in gathering and presenting research data. The quantitative data gathering methods are useful especially when a study needs to measure the cause and effect relationships within the organization. The purpose of the quantitative approach is to avoid subjectivity by means of collecting and analyzing information which describes the experience being studied. (Newman & Benz 1998, 1- 3.)

Quantitative research method is used due to the objectives and limitations of the thesis. Firstly, to be able to see the big picture, and avoid industry-specific biases, quantitative

research method is the most appropriate. Quantitative method allows the researcher to process data from all sizes of companies from various industries and organizational levels and be able to compare them to each other. The research has very specific time limitations as well. The time frame window for this research is very tight since it wants to evaluate employees' experiences during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which covers a roughly 1-month period from mid-March 2020 - April 2020. Therefore, planning, scheduling and conducting online interviews would have been ineffective due to the schedule. By using quantitative method, the author is able to gather data from more employees thus, allowing higher representativeness to the study. Taking into consideration above mentioned reasons the author is convinced that the quantitative research approach is the most effective approach to be used.

4.2   Target group

The target group of this study are employees and managers of organizations that´s workforce has been affected in any way during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research is targeting people who have worked either full-time or part-time during March 2020, the time when the pandemic has been announced and organizations had to make changes in their work life.

Research participants are required to work at any micro-, small-, medium- or large-sized organizations. The research is targeting employees of all industries.

One of the aims of this study is to find out how managers/supervisors can keep employees engaged during a pandemic crisis and to compare the experiences of employees to the ones of supervisors. In order to hear both leader's and employees' perspective, the research is targeting all levels of an organizational chart. This allows the author to hear both sides of the discussion and increase representativeness.

4.3   Data gathering

Data gathering for this research happens through the survey method which is used to collect information from the target group. Beforehand established privacy settings between the author and research participants helped the data gathering process, which states that the information given is anonymous and is used solely for research purposes.

The research method used is quantitative approach; the technique used is the survey method, which is otherwise known as normative survey. The results and findings of the study are compared with the standards taken from the theoretical framework of the thesis. With the survey method, researchers are able to statistically study the specific areas where companies must concentrate. Findings regarding the common practices being done and the methods which are commonly adopted by the employees are obtained with the use of the survey method. (Vaus 2002, 5.)

The survey, seen in Appendix 1 of the thesis, has been done using Google Forms survey creation tool to reach the target population. The survey is based on the theoretical framework. The survey has been distributed to employees of different organizations through the author's social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn. The author used this distribution method in order to reach employees of various different industries instead of focusing solely on one industry or organization. The publicly shared survey allowed voluntary participation, meaning that only those employees would participate in it who would like to be heard and give feedback of their experience. This allowed the author to collect more accurate and detailed information from participants. The author used the distribution method on LinkedIn because the platform allows people to see posts of strangers as well. This way the author was able to obtain data from other than just her own personal and professional connections to increase representativeness of different demographics.

Gathered data and results are stored in the Google Drive internal server and only the thesis author has access to the data. When the survey data collection is concluded the author will export the results of the survey from Google Drive to later be used in chapter 5.

4.4 Data analysis process

Data analysis process is active from the point when the quantitative research survey link is made inactive and further recipient participation is not allowed. The quantitative data collected with the help of Google Forms tool, was transferred to Microsoft Excel, where it was later analyzed. The graphical presentations in this report are made with the help of Microsoft Excel.

The analysis covers three sub-sections, following the three investigative research questions' structure. The three parts are defined as follows: internal communication effectiveness, preferred internal communication tools, and employee engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study has a structured analysis following these set sub-sections for more structured and valid results.

In survey question 8 and 11, Likert scale was utilized to gather information about the effectiveness of internal communication and supervisors' engagement towards their team members. The analysis of survey question 8 utilizes the mean of answers and the frequency distribution of responses. The analysis of survey question 11 utilizes the mean of answers.

Although, the main research method is quantitative, the end of the survey accommodates 3 qualitative, open ended questions, in order to gain more detailed data on employees' individual experiences and help the outcome of the research. The results of these questions have been analyzed by finding similarities within the content of the answers.

5   Results and data analysis

This section of the thesis presents the results of the quantitative research survey distributed to employees of various different organizations and analysis of those results. Analysis is done based on the answers given by the survey recipients linked to the theory presented in chapter 2 and 3.

The quantitative research survey was filled by 66 people. The survey was anonymous, and the questions were to be answered truthfully.

The respondents represented female majority. 71% of the respondents were female, 27% identified themselves as male and 2% of the respondents preferred not to reveal their gender identity. The majority of the respondents were adults. 56% of the participants were between 25-49 years old, 23% were between 18-24 years and 20% were between 50-65 years. Only one respondent was under the age of 18.

The majority of the respondents, 49 people were working full-time during the Covid-19 pandemic while 13 of them have been working part-time. Only 4 of the respondents identified as entrepreneurs/self-employed during the pandemic (Figure 5).
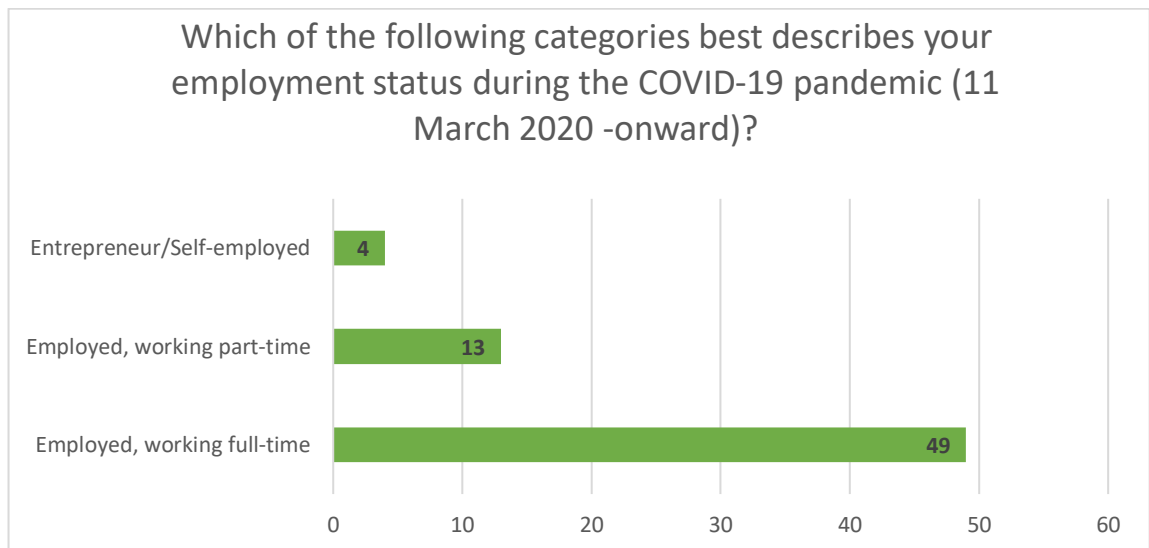

Figure 5: Employment status of respondents (n = 66)

Respondents were working in various different industries and various sizes of organizations. The education industry was over-represented among survey participants, with 30 respondents indicating working in the education industry (Figure 6).
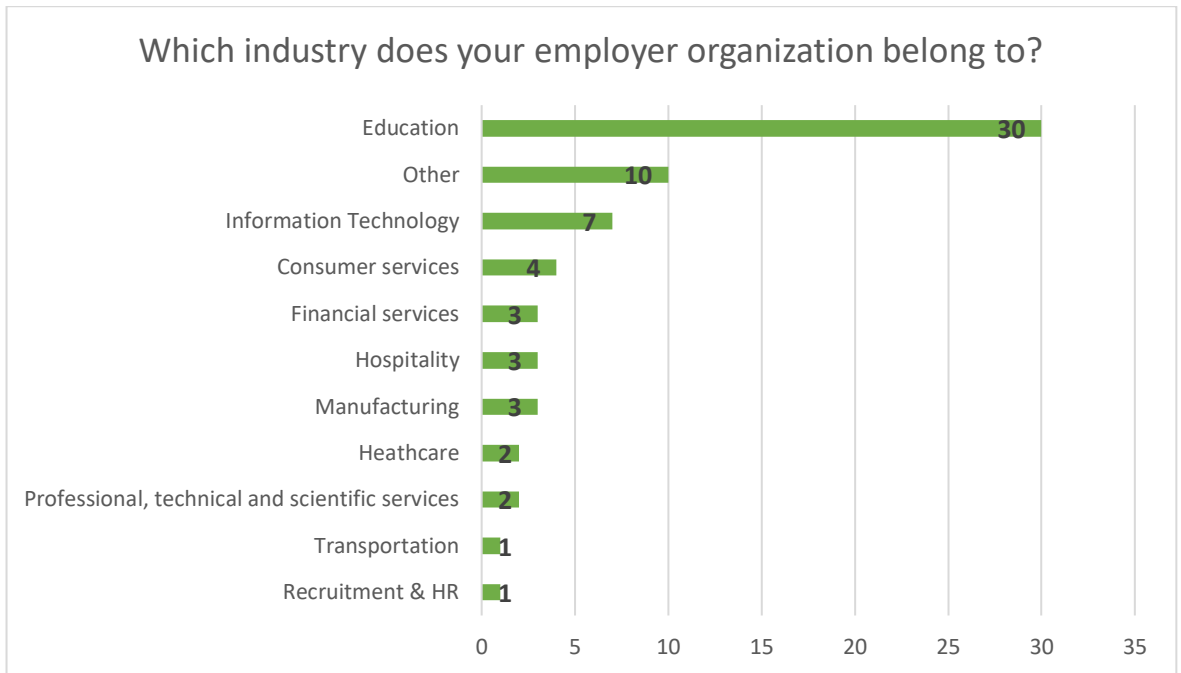
Figure 6: Survey respondents were working in different industries (n = 66)

As Figure 6 shows, 10 respondents choose "Other" as option for the industry of their organization. The second and third most popular pre-defined answer was Information Technology with 7 respondents and Consumer services with 4 respondents choosing this option. The rest of the participants were working at organizations in the financial services, hospitality, manufacturing, healthcare, professional/technical and scientific services, transportation and the recruitment/HR industry (Figure 6).

More than 50% of the survey respondents were working at large-size organizations, while 21% were working in mid-size and 14% in small size organizations (Figure 7).
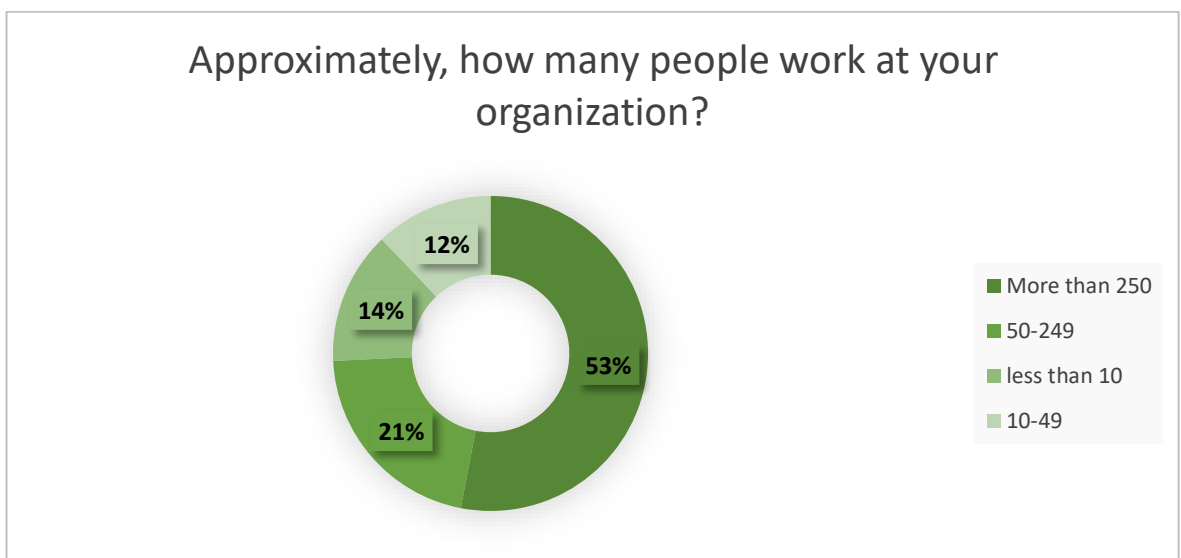

Figure 7: Organization sizes represented among survey respondents. (n = 66)

Out of 66 respondents, 21 were supervisors and/or managers while 44 were team members. One person hasn't specified which group they belong to (Figure 8).
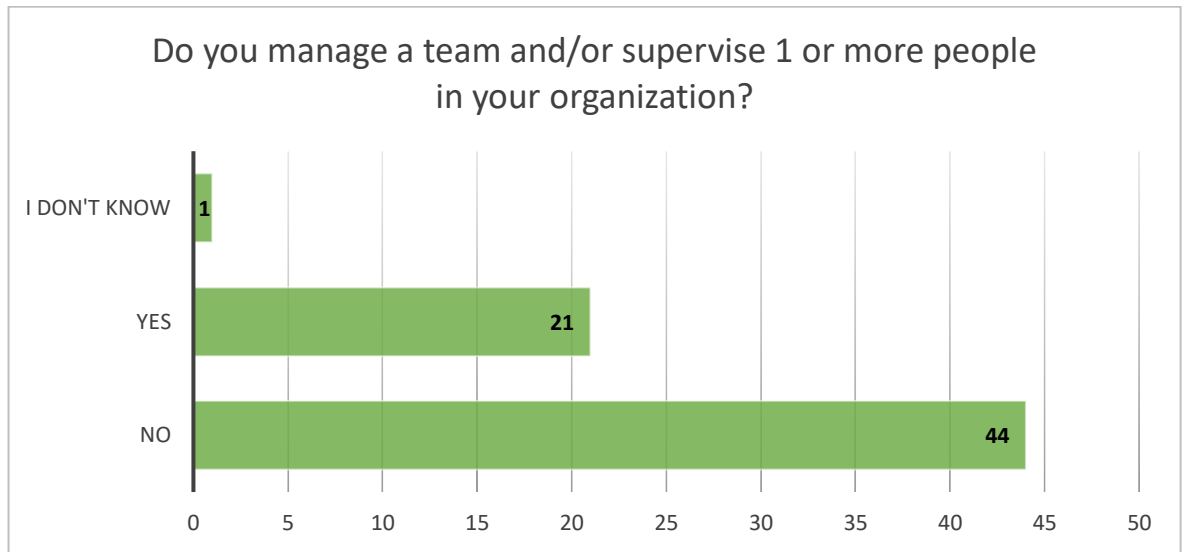

Figure 8: Distribution of employees and managers among survey respondents. (n = 66)

Respondents were also asked to indicate which aspects of their work has been affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. Participants could choose as many options as they preferred. (Figure 9). For the sake of clarity, one person who didn't know whether they were managers or not, have been disregarded in the following figure.
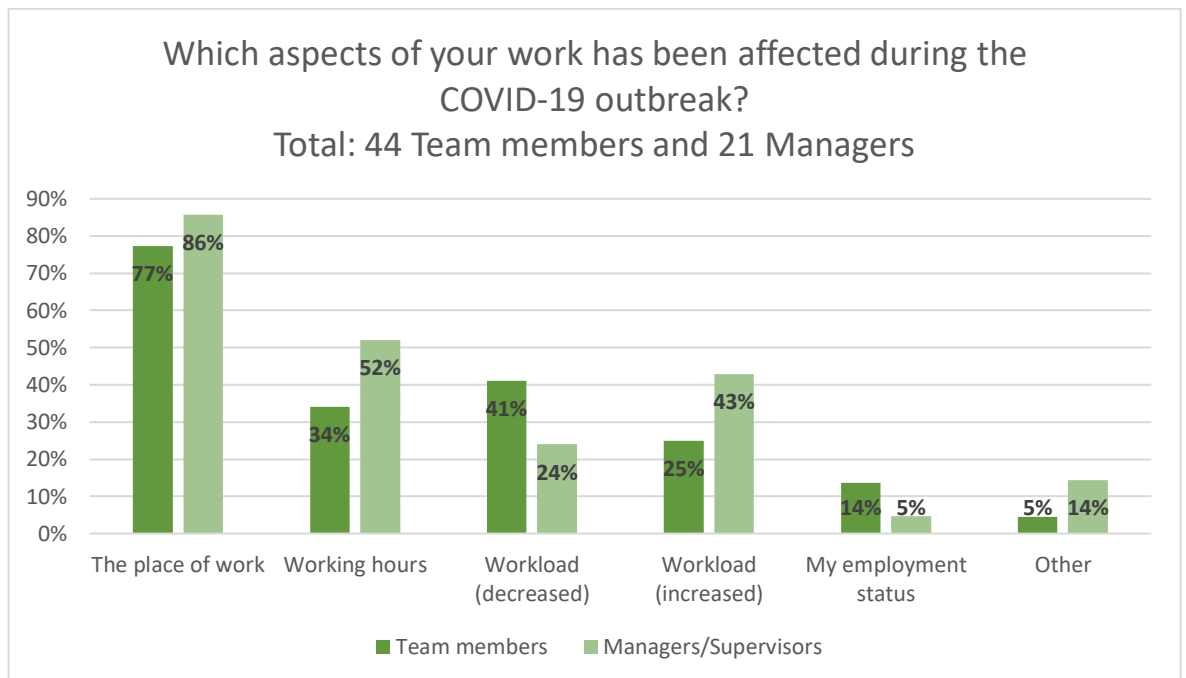

Figure 9: Aspects of work being affected during the Covid-19 pandemic - employees and managers

The place of work has been affected the most, with 77% of team members and 86% of managers indicating changes in this aspect of work. Working hours has been the second most affected aspect with 34% of team members and 52% of managers choosing this option. 41% of team members and 24% of managers experienced decrease of workload while 25% of team members and 43% of managers have experienced an increase of workload. The employment status of 14% of team members and 5% of managers have been affected as well. Respondents who chose "other" specified decreased productivity, enormous stress, lack of PPE, contractors not being available, and inability to get projects completed (Figure 9).

5.1 Internal communication effectiveness during the Covid-19 pandemic

Respondents were asked a series of Likert scale questions related to the internal communication of their organization during the Covid-19 pandemic. Respondents had to consider the general internal communication they received within their organization during the Covid-19 pandemic and then rate their level of satisfaction with the following aspects: amount of information, frequency of delivery, relevance of material, channels of delivery. Likert scale has been determined as follows: 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = dissatisfied, 3 = neutral, 4 = satisfied, 5 = very satisfied.

The mean value of the *amount of information* was 3,4. Out of 66 employees 33 was either very satisfied or satisfied with their organization's communication. 17 respondents were neutral towards it and 16 of them were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (Figure 10).
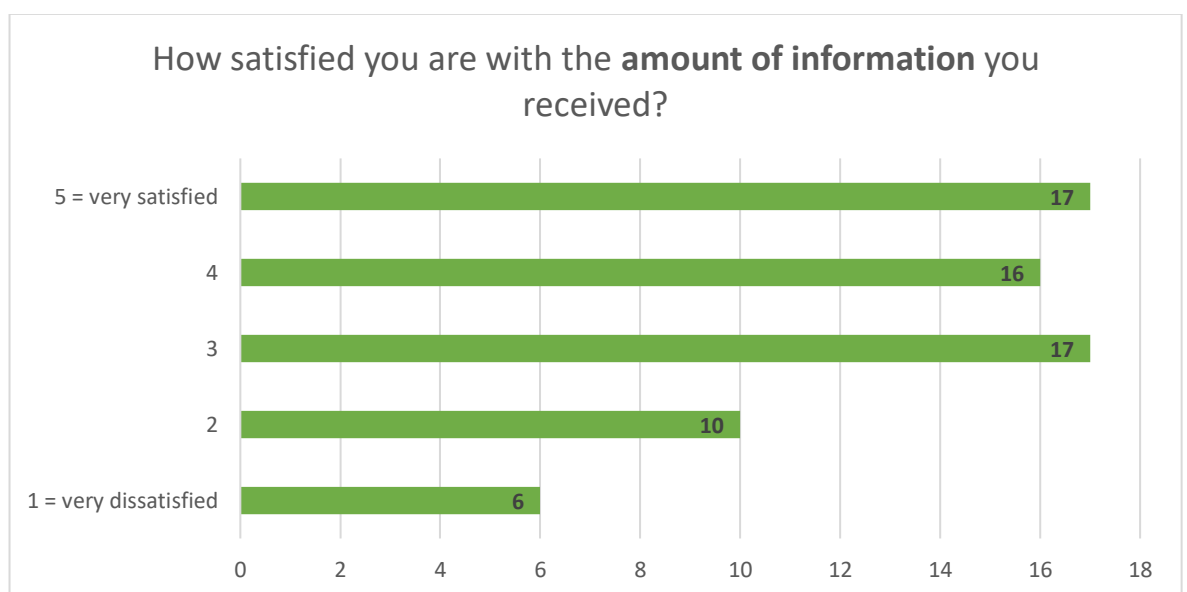

Figure 10: Satisfaction with the amount of information received (n = 66)

Out of 66 employees, 10 were very satisfied and 21 were satisfied with their organization's frequency of delivering information. 22 respondents were neutral towards it and 13 felt dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (Figure 11). The mean value of the *frequency of delivery* was 3,3 making it the lowest ranking examined aspect of internal communication.
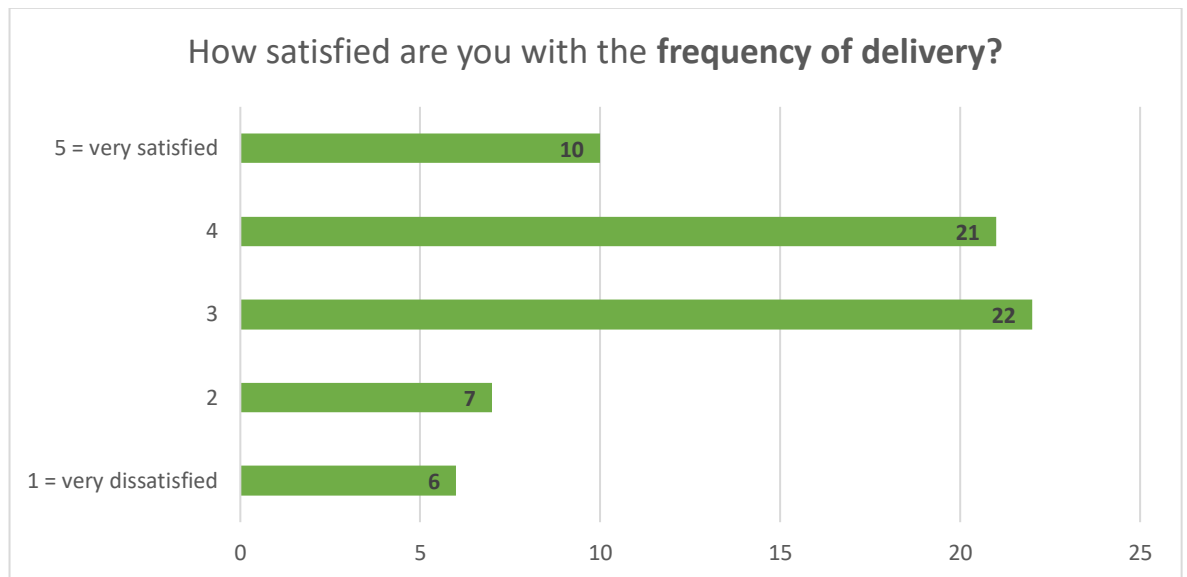

Figure 11: Satisfaction with the frequency of delivery (n = 66)

The relevance of material shared by organizations made 33 employees very satisfied or satisfied while 21 employees felt neutral towards this aspect. 4 employees were dissatisfied and 8 of them were very dissatisfied with the relevance of material (Figure 12). The *relevance of material* had a mean value of 3,5.
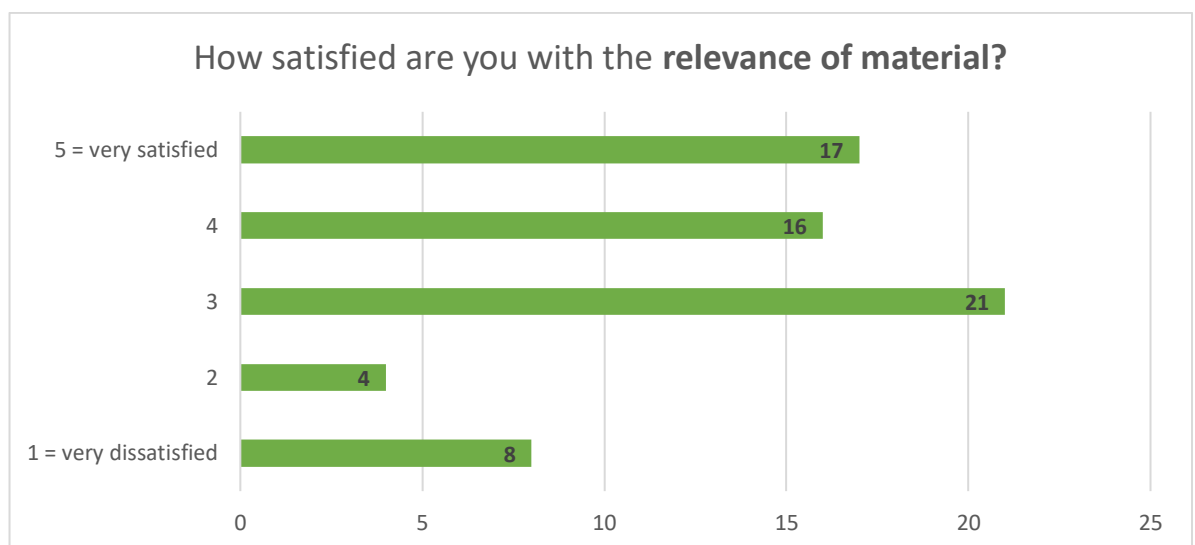

Figure 12: Satisfaction with the relevance of material (n = 66)

The channels of delivery were the most satisfying among the pre-defined internal communication aspects by reaching a mean value of 3,6. When considering the channels of information delivery, out of 66 employees 37 was either very satisfied or satisfied with their organization's communication. 15 respondents were neutral towards it and 14 of them were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (Figure 13).
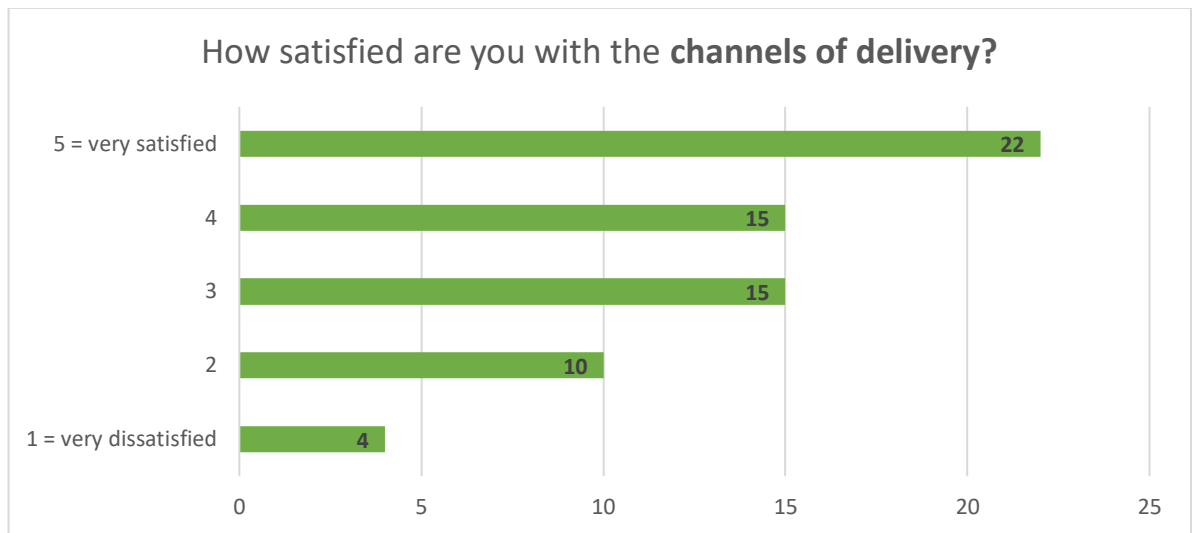

Figure 13: Satisfaction with the channels of delivery (n = 66)

At the end of the quantitative survey employees were asked to provide open ended answer to the question "How was equality in your workplace ensured during the Covid-19 pandemic? (e.g. has your organization considered employees with different capacities of using technology?)". The non-mandatory question received 40 answers, which were then analyzed by finding similarities within them.

Out of 40 respondents, 21 told about a positive experience regarding equality. The most common thing these respondents told was that their workplace has provided trainings and technical assistance after the pandemic, for people with less knowledge about technology. 3 employees mentioned that their employer provided laptops and other office supplies for people who didn't have one, one of them stating "they were very helpful with transporting my extra screen and other office supplies I needed". The rest of the answers didn't include specific details about how equality was ensured but included positive affirmation towards the question.

Out of the respondents, 9 had negative experiences regarding equality during the crisis. One of the respondents told that part-time workers were not considered at all at his/her organization, as they sometimes don't show up for work a long time and the organization didn't call them to update. One respondent pointed out that those without a car could not

bring home screens from work to build a proper office station. Three respondents mentioned inequality regarding technology and that their organization had no consideration for those who had no access to certain company software and social medias. One of these respondent's said, "World at large should recognize that not everyone is high-tech!". One respondent detailed a story about his/her organization that took 1 month to update their staff about the pandemic situation.

Out of 40 respondents 10 have provided either a neutral answer towards the question, such as "I feel like in general everything stayed the same, although we work remotely now" or said that they don't really know whether equality was ensured or not.

Survey question 16 have asked respondents if there is anything else, they would like to add that can help the outcome of this research. The question received 10 answers, out of which 4 can be utilized in this chapter of the research, 2 answers are utilized in chapter 5.3 and the other 4 answers included personal notes to the author and one feedback regarding the survey.

One of the respondents added that generally they were satisfied with the employer's way of communication. Another one noted that the pandemic made her realize that her "workplace is really, really behind the digitalization game". The same respondent added that she would like to change workplace as soon as possible. The third respondent noted that organizations should realize employees have different personal situations. This particular respondent has a mentally ill child which doesn't allow them to be available 24/7 for online meetings. The fourth respondent similarly noted that employers should still respect working hours during the pandemic.

5.2 Preferred internal communication channels

In order to determine the preferred internal communication channels, survey participants were asked to indicate the channels their organization used, and the channels they preferred to use during the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of the researcher was to determine whether the currently used channels are in alliance with the communication channels preferred by employees.

In this part of the survey respondents were allowed to choose more than 1 option, thus, the total percentage is above 100. Out of 66 respondents, 80% indicated their organization using e-mail communication, making it the number one communication channel. Team meetings and Intranet came second with 55 and 53% of organizations using this channel.

33% of organizations have used internal social media group to communicate, 27% used Microsoft Teams group and 20% used other platforms, which were specified as SMS (5 respondents), WhatsApp (2), Phone call (1), Skype (1), Internal app (1), and No communication at all (1). 17% of organizations used Other social media and 6% Internal Slack group. (Figure 14).
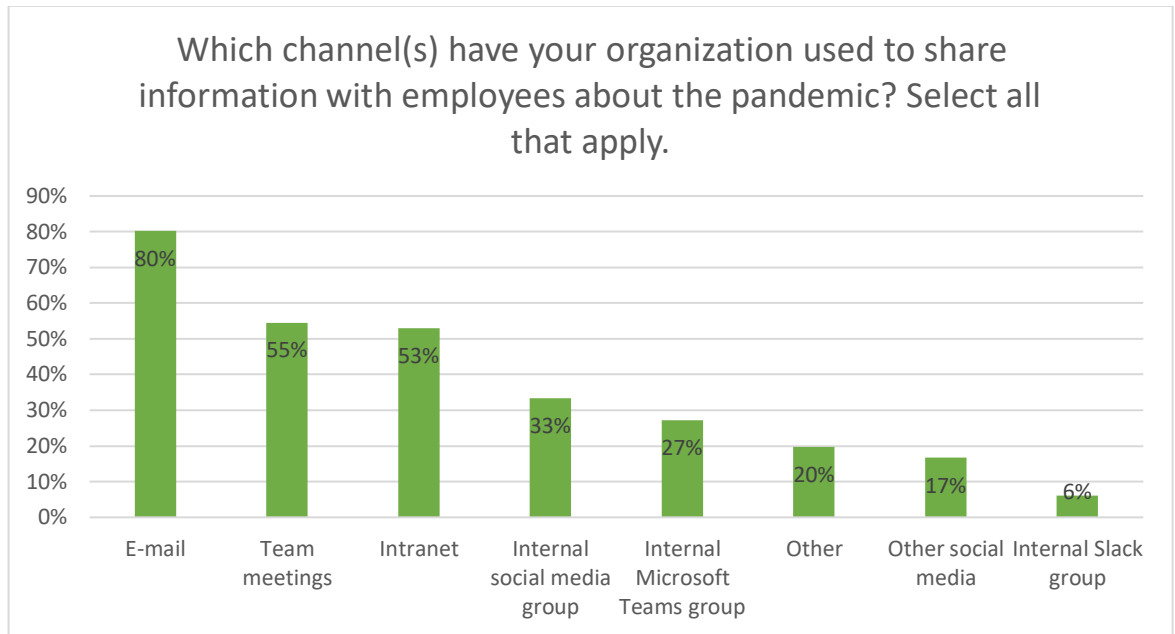

Figure 14. Internal communication channels used by organizations

The internal communication channels preferred by the employees has ranked as seen on Figure 15.
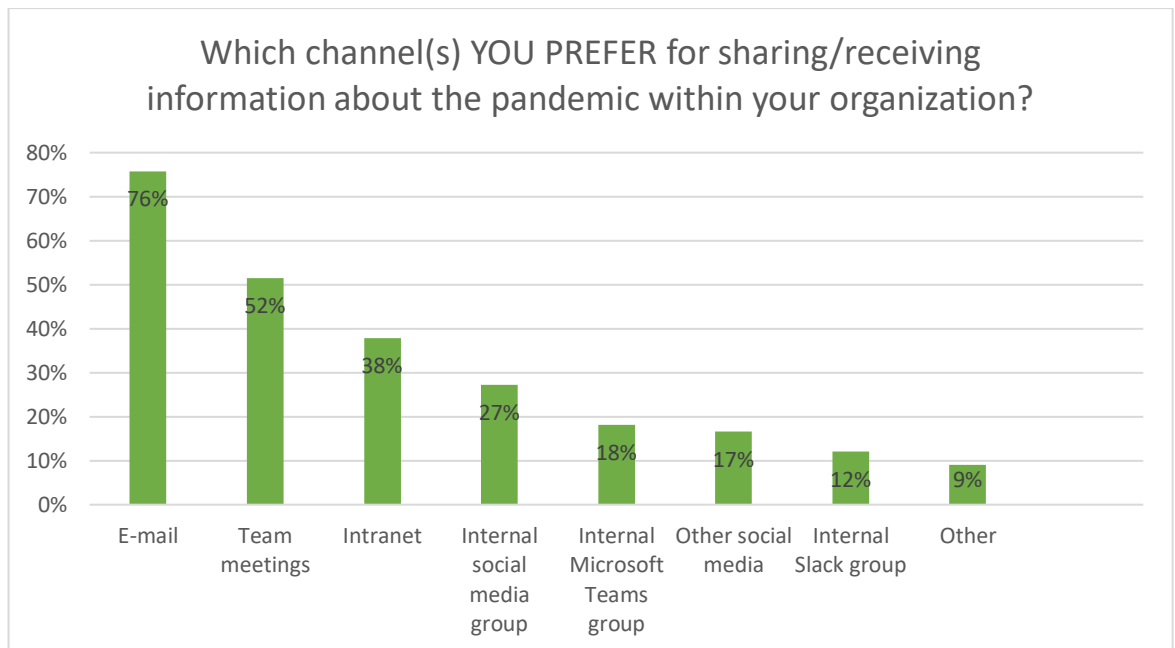

Figure 15. Preferred internal communication channels

E-mail is the most preferred internal communication channel, by 76% of the respondents choosing this option. More than half of the respondents preferred Team meetings while 38% preferred Intranet for sharing/receiving information. Internal social media group has been chosen by 27% of the employees and Internal Microsoft Teams group was preferred by 18%. Out of 66 respondents, 17% prefer to be informed on other social media and 12% preferred Internal Slack group. 9% of respondents chose Other as an option, specifying WhatsApp (4) and Phone call (2) (Figure 15).

Most of the preferred channels and their ranking was aligned with the communication channels that organizations used. Internal Slack group had a 6% higher rate among the preferred channels than among the used channels, as well as WhatsApp and Phone call was more times chosen among the preferred channels than among the used ones.

5.3 Employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis

In the following, supervisor's efforts towards employee engagement will be analysed from the perspective of employees. The chapter will also analyse communication challenges that employees encountered with their teams/supervisors.

The engagement model by Ruck & Welch (Figure 3) have been used to design the survey question 11, in order to examine the effectiveness of employee engagement aspects. The survey question included 6 statements that employees had to evaluate on Likert scale (Table 1).

Table 1. Aspects of employee engagement examined

Aspect of employee engagement (Ruch & Welch, 2012)	Statement in survey Q.11
Role	"My manager gave me clear directions."
Strategy, goals and values	"My manager shared information and kept me up to date."
Voice	"My manager took me and my team's opinion into account."
Support	"I could express my concerns/worries to my manager."
Identification	"I would have done everything the same way as my manager did."
Performance	"My manager provided all the support I needed."

Employees could choose whether they strongly agree (=5), agree (=4), neither agree nor disagree (=3), disagree (=2), strongly disagree (=1) with each statement.
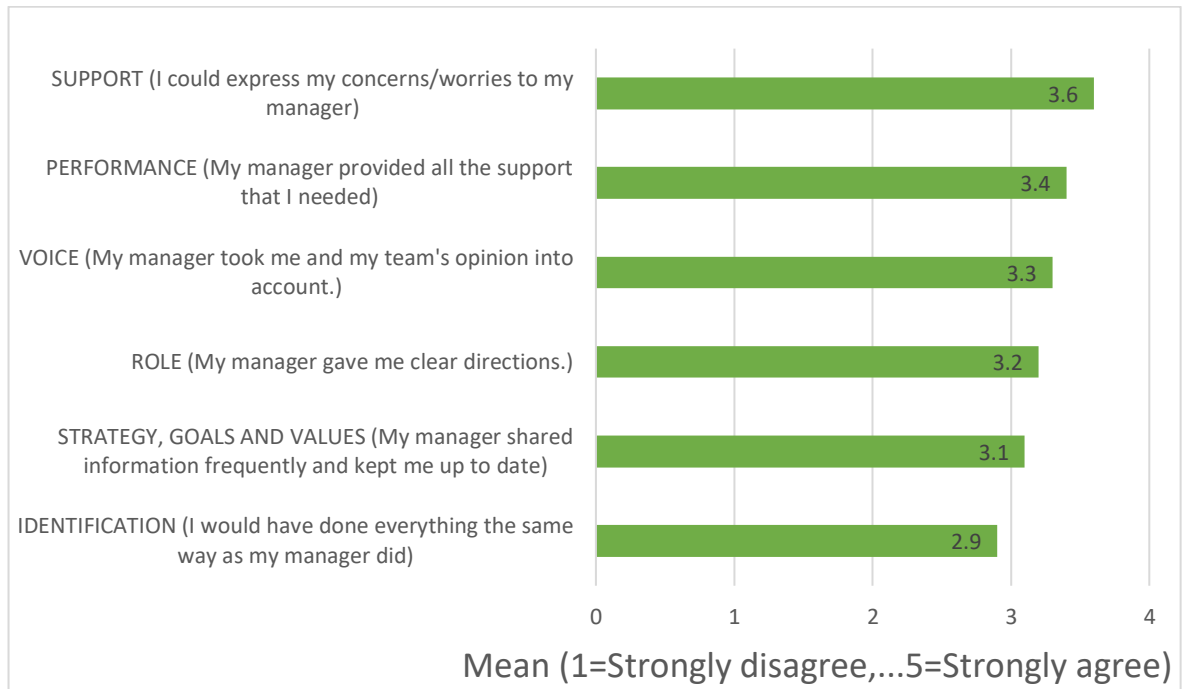

Figure 16. Employees' engagement with direct supervisor

As depicted in Figure 16 it is possible to see the different aspects of employee engagement in descendent order by statistically grouping them to their degree of efficiency when employees were communicating with their supervisors during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Respondents voted 'support' and 'performance' the highest performing aspects of employee engagement with a mean of 3.6 and 3.4, respectively. 'Voice' was fairly rated by employees as well as the aspect of 'role' and 'strategy, goals and values'. The lowest rated aspect of employee engagement was 'Identification' with a mean of 2.9 (Figure 16).

How did you communicate with your team/supervisor during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- 5%
- 5%
- 26%
- 64%

Legend:
- Remotely, virtually
- Both face to face and remotely
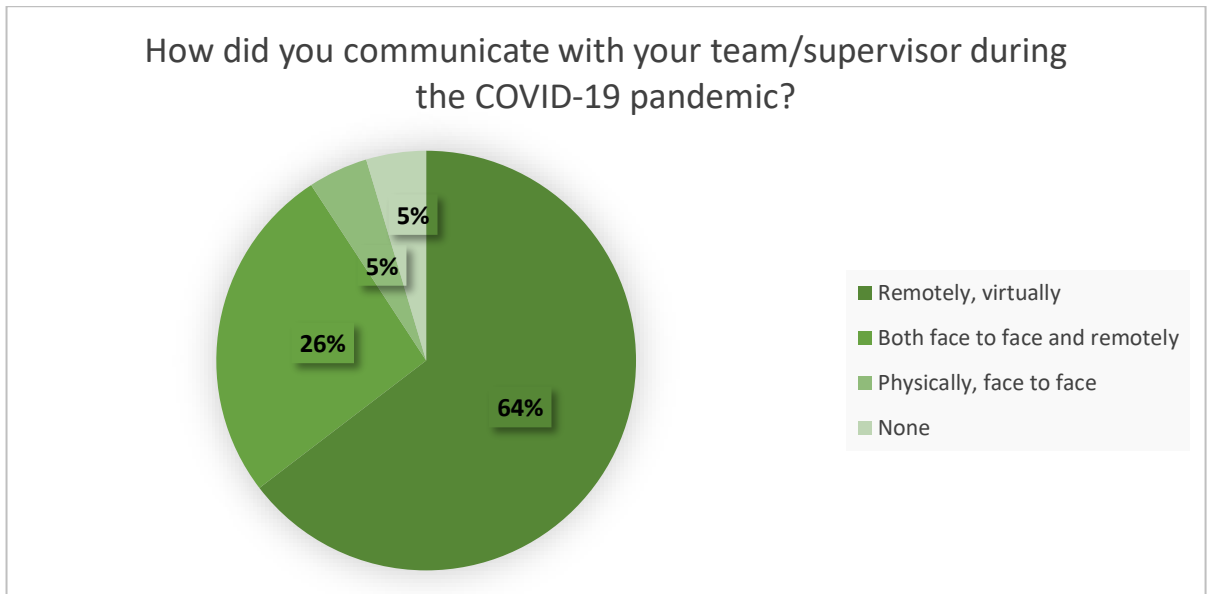- Physically, face to face
- None

Figure 17. Mode of communication with supervisors/teams

Respondents were asked to indicate the mode of communication they used with their supervisors/teams during the Covid-19 pandemic. 64% of respondents communicated remotely/virtually, 26% both face to face and remotely while 5% communicated only face to face. 5% of the respondents chose "Other" option, where they all specified having no communication between them and their supervisors/teams (Figure 17).

Have you encountered any communication challenges with your team/supervisor during the COVID-19 pandemic?
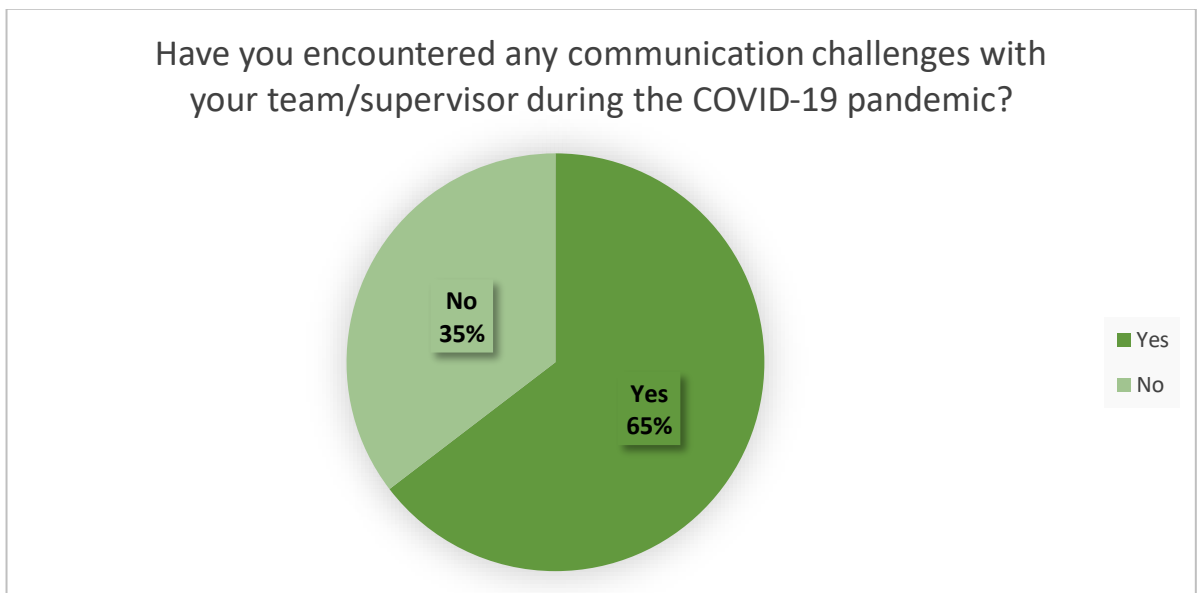
- No 35%
- Yes 65%

Legend:
- Yes
- No

Figure 18. Encountering communication challenges with supervisors/teams

Out of 66 respondents, 42 (65%) have encountered some sort of communication challenges with their supervisors/teams, while 23 of them (35%) indicated that they haven't had any challenges in communicating (Figure 18).

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of communication modes by experience of challenges

Mode of communication		Challenges in communication		
		Yes	No	Total
Remotely, virtually	Count	28	14	42
Both face to face and remotely	Count	9	9	18
Physically, face to face	Count	3	0	3
None	Count	2	1	3
Total	**Count**	**42**	**24**	**66**

Table 2 shows that out of 42 respondents, that were communicating remotely with their supervisors, 28 have encountered challenges in communication, while 14 experienced no challenges. 50% of employees that were communicating both face to face and remotely reported challenges in communication. By contrast, all of the employees that communicated only face to face with their supervisors, encountered challenges in communication.

When indicating their biggest challenges, employees were allowed to choose more than one option. Respondents chose between 1-2 options on average. The biggest communication challenge employees faced with their teams/supervisors was the unclarity of goals and priorities (Figure 19).
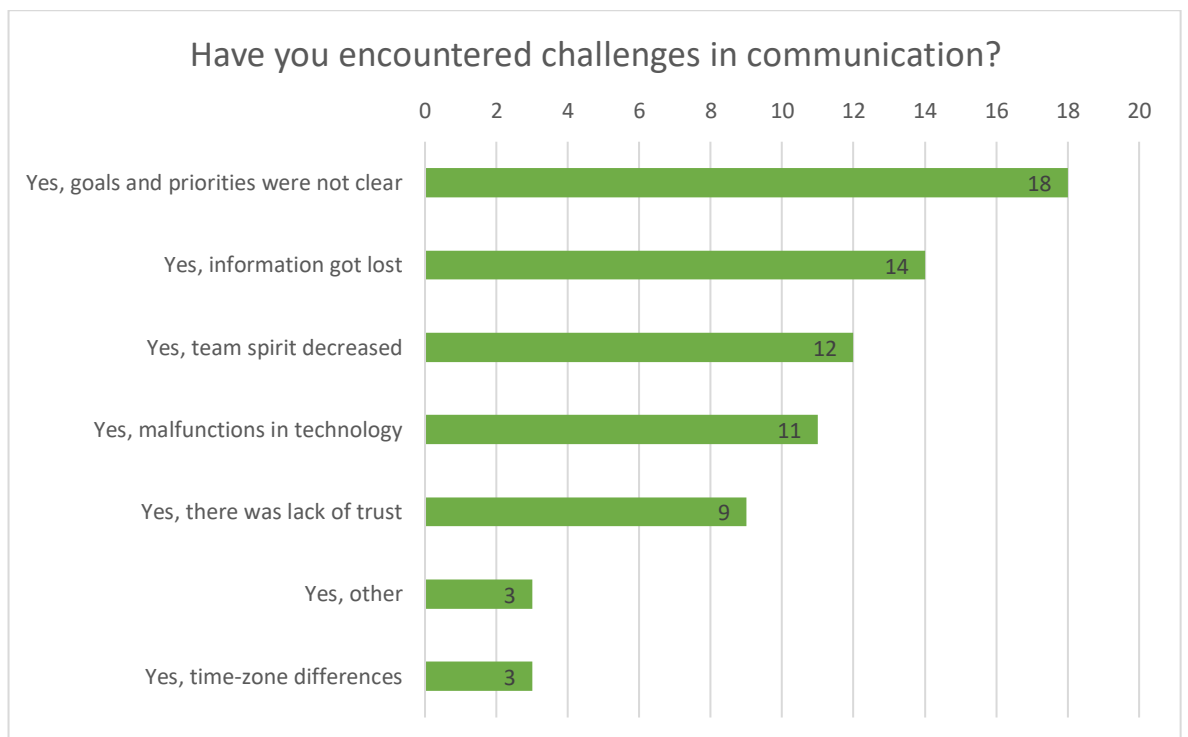

Figure 19. Communication challenges reported by employees during the Covid-19 pandemic

Information lost has been the second most common challenge with 14 employees choosing this option. Decrease in team spirit and malfunctions in technology have been reported by 12 and 11 employees, respectively. There were 3 respondents who chose "Other" option, and specified it as less communication, no interaction and decrease in the efficiency of communication.

In survey question 15, respondents were asked to provide open ended answers to the question "If you could give your manager advice on how to more effectively manage you/your team during the COVID-19 outbreak, what would it be?". The optional question received 38 answers, which were then analysed by finding similarities within their content. Based on their content, the answers have been grouped to 6 different categories: frequency, clarity, team spirit, mode of communication, equality and other.

Out of 38 respondents, 13 would give an advice related to the frequency of their manager's communication. Respondents advised their supervisors to communicate more actively and regularly. Some of the more specific advices were e.g. "More cross department meetings to update each other and create a cross functional action plan" or "More active communication as there was a gap in several days when the whole team did not know what to expect and what will happen in terms of our employment". One of the respondents said, "Communicate clearly that you're available for further inquiries or discussions and make time for those in your calendar."

Another group of answers were related to the clarity of communication, such as "Be clear, transparent and care about the team " and "Give clear guidance and tell the priorities of work - because under the COVID-19 outbreak it is not possible to deliver work as effectively as before - something needs to be left behind. Determine focus of work and give clear explanations." One respondent added that "My manager is not very good at managing. At some point, there was just a lot of communication in the mailboxes and many of them were conflicting".

There were 5 advices regarding the mode of communication. Respondents wished for one on one meeting in Microsoft Teams, personal contact with supervisors and short weekly meetings to focus on daily tasks. One respondent from the education industry wished for a less bureaucratic communication; "It´s stupid to tie the weeks to the timetable - online pedagogy has a different logic. Due to bad management, I ended up one day working 16 h non-stop (due to the "time slot logic")". Another respondent advised their manager to point out team leaders who can focus on certain communication platforms.

A handful of employees advised their supervisors to put more effort into keeping up the team spirit. One respondent advised their manager to add "virtual coffee breaks" to substitute the usual lunch breaks and coffee breaks at the office, where employees can discuss both work and not-work related topics. Another respondent added "More Skype Calls to encourage and support each other".

A smaller group of respondents addressed equality and advised their managers to "Contact all staff and not just a few" and to "Ensure that all information reaches every individual of your team. If they're not in office, call or email them".

Out of 38 respondents 4 wouldn't give any advice to their managers. Most of them noted that their direct supervisor did a good job, and one of them said "Nothing, because at the time being, nobody had the right answers".
Another respondent addressed safety, as of "I would recommend checking on the team members' awareness of the situation to understand how seriously they take it and whether they act according to the safety instructions given by the government and health organization".

In question 16 respondents could add any additional information that they thought would help the outcome of this research. One of the respondents said that their manager organized virtual coffee breaks during the pandemic, which was a positive experience and helped to keep the team spirit high. Another respondent added that their team hasn't been hit hard by the pandemic because they had put lots of effort into transparent communication between team members and supervisors even before the pandemic.

6   Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly explain the key findings of the research, as well as give recommendations for organizations' internal crisis communication and further research. At the end of the chapter, there is a brief reflection on the learning of the thesis author.

6.1   Key findings

This study aimed to examine the internal communication strategies of organizations during the Covid-19 crisis. The objective of this thesis was to research organization's internal communication effectiveness, preferred communication tools and explore how managers and team leaders engaged their team members during the crisis.

According to the findings, the Covid-19 pandemic brought changes to every workplace. The most common change employees reported was the place of work and the extension/flexure of working hours. There were more team members who reported a decrease in workload than those who experienced an increase. In contrast, managers' workload has rather increased during the pandemic. Employees in non-managerial positions have experienced changes in the employment status more frequently than managers.

The quantitative research survey examined how employees perceived their organization's internal communication. The researcher had set pre-determined aspects of internal communication that respondents had to rate according to their level of satisfaction. The highest rated aspect was the channels of communication, which most of the respondents were satisfied with. The relevance of material shared by organizations during the pandemic was satisfying for most of the employees, however, this aspect has also received the most "very dissatisfied" votes among the examined internal communication aspects. The amount of information shared by organizations received a rather neutral satisfaction rate with similar number of employees being satisfied and dissatisfied with it. The lowest rated aspect of internal communication was the frequency of delivery which most employees rated 3 on the 1-5 scale.

One of the findings of the qualitative survey questions was regarding organizations' actions towards equality during the Covid-19 pandemic. Respondents had a positive experience in those organizations that provided necessary office supplies, training programs and technical assistance for employees with less knowledge about technology. There were several respondents who reported about inequality in their workplace during the pandemic. The organization of these respondents didn't consider employees with less knowledge and

access to technical tools, different internal systems and social media. There were also negative experiences towards organizations who were late to update employees about the changes the pandemic brought to the workplace. Some respondents experienced inequality between part-time and full-time workers as well as employees with access to cars and those without one.

According to the questionnaire results, most employees preferred to communicate through e-mail and team meetings during the pandemic. Organizational intranet and internal social media groups were highly preferred as well by employees. The questionnaire results point out that organizations are using most of these channels already to communicate with their employees. This result was to be expected as employees reported being highly satisfied with the channels of communication in the earlier part of the survey. There are some internal communication channels that are not much in use, but employees would still prefer them. These channels are WhatsApp, phone calls and Internal Slack groups.

Both the quantitative and qualitative part of the survey examined how managers and team leaders performed in terms of engaging their teams during the pandemic. The results show that most employees didn't receive clear directions from their supervisors and were lacking frequent updates and information. The results also show that most employees cannot identify with their managers' actions during the pandemic. Interestingly, those employees who communicated both face to face and remotely with their supervisors during the pandemic, faced the least challenges in communication. Employees who communicated solely remotely or solely face to face reported many challenges.

The most common communication challenges employees faced with their supervisors were the obscurity of goals and priorities, loss of information and decrease in team spirit. In the qualitative part of the survey respondents urged their supervisors to communicate more often during a crisis situation and give clear guidance, as well as determine the priorities of work during the pandemic. Short weekly meetings to focus on daily tasks and virtual coffee breaks seemed to contribute positively to employees' engagement. Employees also recommended supervisors to check on team members' awareness about safety regulations.

6.2 Recommendations for organizations and managers

This subchapter focuses on the recommendations the researcher has based on the findings of the research. The equality of employees, frequency of communication, and the actions of managers are discussed.

Organizations globally are recommended to develop their internal crisis communication efforts both on organizational and team level. Based on the research findings it is recommended for organizations and managers to implement more frequent messaging during crisis periods and select relevant information to be shared with employees.

For big and medium sized companies, a biweekly, virtual Q&A session can help with keeping employees up to date about changes and enhance transparency between employees and management. The Q&A session would allow employees to ask their questions related to new guidelines, safety, layoffs, new tools and thus, help them feel more certain about the future. For small sized companies as well as team leaders, weekly meetings are recommended to determine the focus and priorities of employees.

According to the results of the research, employees are generally satisfied with the channels that organizations used to deliver crisis-related information. On team level communication, it is recommended for supervisors to ask for feedback from their team members about the preferred channels and if needed, implement the usage of new channels.

Both organizations and managers are recommended to consider the actions they are taking towards ensuring equality within the workforce. It is recommended to put more effort into informing all levels of the organization and all types of employees about changes, regardless of workers' employment type, or their relationship with the organization. Team leaders are recommended to make themselves available for one-on-one discussions with their team members to increase trust and transparency as well as to make sure employees receive enough support from their supervisors.

Organizations switching to online working environments are recommended to conduct training programs for those employees who have less access or knowledge about technology. If necessary, it is recommended to point out employees with more advanced technological skills to host these trainings while at the same time allowing them to re-organize their priorities. Organizations are recommended to encourage their managers to allow flexibility even more during crisis times.

Team leaders and supervisors are recommended to put more effort into keeping up the team spirit during a crisis as it is highly contributing to employees' engagement. Virtual coffee and lunch breaks, online birthday celebrations, or Friday quizzes are some ideas for online activities team leaders can implement within their groups. For some teams, a co-created playlist can help to stay connected with colleagues through music. Team leaders of all companies are recommended to be consistent with rewards and recognition even during a crisis. Similarly, managers are recommended to schedule informal check-ins with their team members to collect and give feedback.

6.3   Recommendations for further research

As a continuum of the previous subchapter's recommendations, this subchapter focuses on different aspects that would require further research regarding the research objective. Firstly, further research regarding the research period will be discussed. Secondly, recomendations are given to who should be included in the sampling of the further research.

As the research was conducted in early days of the global pandemic, the experiences of the target group were still very fresh and therefore could have changed during the time. Further research should be conducted with a longer time period or with another similar length period after the crisis is over to further develop the results gathered in this report.

Originally the focus of the research was to gather data from employees of all types and sizes of organizations, which was proven to be challenging. The sample of this research was highly dependent on the researcher's network connections which led to lack of representativeness in industries and sizes of researched organizations. Further research should be conducted involving a more diverse sample group, including focus on the industries underrepresented in this research.

6.4   Reflection on Learning

The overall self-assessment of the thesis is very positive. Among the strengths of the process, being a part-time employee at two different organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic was a valuable help to gain insights and understand the context of this research.

Conducting this research was highly educational for the author. This research gave the opportunity to expand and develop the theoretical knowledge gained during the specialization studies. Additionally, this research has proved to be a great tool in developing academic writing and referencing of the author.

The research has given new insights and knowledge into the field of organizational communication, crisis management and employee engagement. As an organizational communication student, this research has provided valuable information to the author's studies and career.

The main challenge was posed by time management. As a matter of fact, conducting the thesis research while working full-time was challenging but rewarding. The author's interest in the research subject has significantly helped during the writing process.

The author wishes this thesis to be an inspiration and perhaps a point of reference from which to further develop research in the field of internal crisis communication and employee engagement.

References

Adu-Oppong, A.A., & Agyin-Birikorang, E. 2014. Communication in the workplace: Guidelines for improving effectiveness. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304782482_COMMUNICATION_IN_THE_WORKPLACE_GUIDELINES_FOR_IMPROVING_EFFECTIVENESS Accessed: 3 April 2020

Aislelabs 2020. How Shopping Centers Globally are Responding to Coronavirus URL: https://www.aislelabs.com/blog/2020/03/23/how-shopping-centres-responding-coronavirus/ Accessed: 31 March 2020

Bartels, J., Peters, O., de Jong, M. D. T., Pruyn, A. T. H., & Molen, M. 2010. Horizontal and vertical communication as determinants of professional and organisational identification. *Personnel review*, *39*(2), 210-226. https://doi.org/10.1108/00483481011017426

Cambridge Dictionary, 2020. Definition of communication in English. URL: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/communication Accessed: 31 March 2020

Chow, C. 2019. What Is An Intranet And Is It Still Relevant For Your Organization? URL: https://www.socialchorus.com/blog/future-of-work/what-is-an-intranet-and-is-it-still-relevant-to-your-organization/ Accessed: 6 July 2020

Coombs, W., & Holladay, S. J. 2002. *Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets. Management Communication Quarterly, 16(2), 165–186.* doi:10.1177/089331802237233

Coombs, W. 2007. Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Corp Reputation Rev* 10, 163–176 https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049

Coombs, W.T., 2010. Parameters for crisis communication URL: https://www.academia.edu/2675404/Parameters_for_crisis_communication Accessed: 22 April 2020

Coombs, W.T., 2015. Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing and Responding. 4th edition.

IMF, World Economic Outlook 2020. The Great Lockdown: Worst Economic Downturn since Great Depression. URL: https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/14/the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression/ Accessed: 25 April 2020

John Hopkins University 2020. Coronavirus COVID-19 Global Cases by the Center of Systems Science and Engineering (CCSE) at John Hopkins University (JHU) URL: https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/i dex.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6 Accessed: 31 March 2020

John S. 2020. What is Slack? Everything you need to know about the professional messaging platform URL: https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-slack?r=US&IR=T Accessed: 6 July 2020

Koenig, D. & Freking, K. 2020. Cruise stocks sink after missing out on economic-relief bill URL: https://apnews.com/819d004059e6b165d9509f2d346a7d41 Accessed: 31 March 2020

Men, L. R. 2014. Strategic Internal Communication. Management Communication Quarterly, 28(2), 264–284. doi:10.1177/0893318914524536

Newman, I. & Benz, C. 1998. Qualitative-Quantitative Research Methodology: Exploring the Interactive Continuum. Illinois.

Osborne, S.; Hammoud, Mohamad, S., 2017. Effective Employee Engagement in the Workplace. In International Journal of Applied Management and Technology 16 (1), pp. 50–67.

Roundy, L., What Is a Stakeholder in Education? - Definition & Examples. 2016. URL: https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-a-stakeholder-in-education-definition-examples.html Accessed: 25 April 2020.

Rouse, M. 2020. Microsoft Teams, URL: https://searchunifiedcommunications.techtarget.com/definition/Microsoft-Teams Accessed: 6 July 2020

Ruck, K., & Welch, M. (2012). *Valuing internal communication; management and employee perspectives. Public Relations Review, 38(2), 294–302.* doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.12.016

Sluss, D. M., Klimchak, M., & Holmes, J. J. 2008. Perceived organizational support as a mediator between relational exchange and organizational identification. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 73(3), 457–464. URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2008.09.001

Statista, 2020. Have you started working from home because of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic? URL: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1105777/share-of-people-working-from-home-due-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic-finland/ Accessed: 25 April 2020

Sturges, D. L. 1994. *Communicating through Crisis. Management Communication Quarterly, 7(3), 297–316.* doi:10.1177/0893318994007003004

Tkalac Verčič, A., Verčič, D., & Sriramesh, K. 2012. Internal communication: Definition, parameters, and the future. Public Relations Review, 38(2), 223-230. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.12.019

UNESCO 2020a. Adverse consequences of school closures. URL: https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences Accessed: 25 April 2020

UNESCO 2020b. Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19. URL: https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures Accessed: 31 March 2020

Vaus, D. 2002. Surveys in Social Research. 5th edition. Allen & Unwin. Leonards. Australia. URL: https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=1IRDJEtBg48C&pg=PA5&dq=quantitative+research+survey+method&hl=en&sa=X&ei=z8qtUfOnC8eM4ATpoYHQAw&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=quantitative%20research%20survey%20method&f=false Accessed: 26 May 2020.

Wayne, S. J., Liden, R. C., & Sparrowe, R. T. 1994. Developing leader-member exchanges: The influence of gender and ingratiation. *American Behavioral Scientist, 37*(5), 697–714. URL: https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764294037005009

WebFinance Inc. 2020a. Definition of Communication. URL:
http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/communication.html   Accessed: 31   March
2020.

WebFinance   Inc.   2020b.   Definition   of   Internal   Communication.   URL:
http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/internal-communication.html   Accessed: 31
March 2020

World   Health   Organization   2010.   What   is   a   pandemic?   URL:
https://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/frequently_asked_questions/pandemic/en/
Accessed: 31 March 2020.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Online research survey

Internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this important research, and ultimately, in helping me graduate. My name is Evelin Bakó and I am a third year BBA student with a major in Organizational Communication at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki, Finland.

I am conducting research as part of my final thesis, with the objective of examining organization's internal communication effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following survey consists of 16 questions and takes approximately 5 minutes to answer. All responses are kept anonymous and nobody will be identifiable in the research.

The data gained from this survey is stored in a password protected electronic format. To help protect your confidentiality, the survey does not contain information that will personally identify you. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only and may be shared with representatives of Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact me by e-mail: evelin.bako@myy.haaga-helia.fi

* Required

1. Your age *

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Under 18 years

   ( ) 18-24 years

   ( ) 25-49 years

   ( ) 50-65 years

   ( ) Over 65 years

2.   Your gender *

Mark only one oval.

( ) Female

( ) Male

( ) Other

( ) Prefer not to say

3.   Which of the following categories best describes your employment status during the COVID-19 pandemic (11 March 2020 –onward)? (If you were not employed, please don't fill out this survey.) *

Mark only one oval.

( ) Employed, working full-time

( ) Employed, working part-time

( ) Entrepreneur/Self-employed

( ) Other: _____

4.   Approximately, how many people work at your organization? *

Mark only one oval.

( ) less than 10

( ) 10-49

( ) 50-249

( ) More than 250

45

5.   Which industry does your employer organization belong to? If you are not sure, click "other". *

Mark only one oval.

- ⬭ Construction
- ⬭ Consumer services
- ⬭ Education
- ⬭ Entertainment
- ⬭ Financial services
- ⬭ Heathcare
- ⬭ Hospitality
- ⬭ Information Technology
- ⬭ Manufacturing
- ⬭ Transportation
- ⬭ Pharmaceutical
- ⬭ Professional, technical and scientific services
- ⬭ Recruitment & HR
- ⬭ Other

6.   Do you manage a team and/or supervise 1 or more people in your organization? *

Mark only one oval.

- ⬭ Yes
- ⬭ No
- ⬭ I don't know

46

7. Which aspects of your work has been affected by the COVID-19 outbreak? Select all that apply. *

Check all that apply.

☐ Workload (increased)
☐ Workload (decreased)
☐ The place of work
☐ Working hours
☐ My employment status
☐ Nothing
Other: ☐ _____

In the following, I am measuring your satisfaction with the internal communication of your organization, your preferences regarding communication channels and your direct manager's actions during the pandemic (11, March 2020 - onward.) Note that all responses are kept anonymous and nobody will be identifiable in the research.

---

8. Consider the general internal communication you received from your organization during the COVID-19 pandemic, (11, March 2020 - onward) then rate your level of satisfaction with each aspect. *

Mark only one oval per row.

	1 = very dissatisfied	2	3	4	5 = very satisfied
Amount of information	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Frequency of delivery	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Relevance of material	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Channel(s) of delivery	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

47

9. Which channel(s) have your organization used to share information with employees about the pandemic? Select all that apply. *

Check all that apply.

- [ ] Team meetings
- [ ] Intranet
- [ ] Internal Microsoft Teams group
- [ ] Internal Slack group
- [ ] Internal social media group
- [ ] E-mail
- [ ] Twitter
- [ ] Other social media

Other: [ ] _____

10. Which channel(s) YOU PREFER for sharing/receiving information about the pandemic within your organization? Select all that apply. *

Check all that apply.

- [ ] Team meetings
- [ ] Intranet
- [ ] Internal Microsoft Teams group
- [ ] Internal Slack group
- [ ] Internal social media group
- [ ] E-mail
- [ ] Twitter
- [ ] Other social media

Other: [ ] _____

11. Consider your direct supervisor's/manager's actions during the COVID-19 outbreak (11, March 2020 - onward) and rate your level of agreement with each section. (If you don't have a manager/supervisor please skip this section.)

Mark only one oval per row.

	1 = strongly disagree	2	3	4	5 = strongly agree
My manager gave me clear directions.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My manager shared information frequently and kept me up to date.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My manager took me and my team's opinion into account.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I could express my concerns/worries to my manager.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
My manager provided all the support that I needed.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I would have done everything the same way as my manager did.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

12. How did you communicate with your team/supervisor during the COVID-19 pandemic (11, March 2020 - onward)?

Check all that apply.

☐ Physically, face to face
☐ Remotely, virtually
☐ Both face to face and remotely
Other: ☐ _____

49

13. Have you encountered any communication challenges with your team/supervisor during the COVID-19 pandemic? (11, March 2020 - onward) Select all that apply. *

Check all that apply.

☐ No, there were no communication challenges
☐ Yes, team spirit decreased
☐ Yes, information got lost
☐ Yes, goals and priorities were not clear
☐ Yes, malfunctions in technology
☐ Yes, there was lack of trust
☐ Yes, time-zone differences
Other: ☐ _____

> Is there anything - a personal story, an idea etc. - you would like to add that you think would benefit the outcome of this research? Please share it below, as it is much appreciated. All responses will be kept anonymous and nobody will be identifiable in the research.

14. How was equality in your workplace ensured during the COVID-19 pandemic? (e.g. has your organization considered employees with different capacities for using technology?)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

15. If you could give your manager advice on how to more effectively manage you/your team during the COVID-19 outbreak, what would it be?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

16.   Anything else you would like to add?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Google.

Google Forms