



Redefining Internal Communication for Sustainable Organisational Management: A Critical Review of Studies

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ABSTRACT

Communication is currently undergoing an unprecedented transformation with adverse effects on organisational sustainability. It is therefore important that organisations pay attention to their internal communication to ensure that management, employees, and other stakeholders are kept informed throughout the change. Internal communication refers to the communication that takes place within an organisation and is an essential way of communicating policies and projects to employees. This paper examined the concept of internal communication for sustainable organisational management, focusing on the communication channels currently in use by organisations in Nigeria. The paper used the media richness theory (MRT) to understand the different perspectives of internal communication in Nigerian organisations. Particularly, it reviewed the appropriate channels for employee communication and concluded that internal communication is vital to the sustenance of any organisation and should be managed effectively.

KEYWORDS

Critical Review,
Internal
Communication,
Media Richness
Theory (MRT),
Sustainable
Organisations,
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INTRODUCTION

Communication is crucial in organisations, but it has undergone significant changes in recent times. Countries are facing a changing socio-political and economic landscape, which in turn affects organisations. To mitigate these challenges, organisations are always on the lookout for ways to overcome the negative impacts. Technology is also advancing rapidly, and only organisations that can adapt to these changes can remain competitive (He, Huang, Choi, &

Bilgihan, 2023). Additionally, generational differences are now prevalent in many organisations, and this also affects how communication is carried out.

One of the driving forces that help organisations to keep abreast of changes is effective communication (Bagga, Gera, & Haque, 2023). Communication in organisations today needs to be apt so that management, employees, and all stakeholders are carried along through this course of change. Organisations that have realised the importance of communication constantly find ways to put the interplay of these forces into use as a competitive advantage. This realisation implies that corporate communicators and public relations practitioners whose jobs should be managerial need to improve their competencies to deliver much-needed results constantly. Key aspects of this job function include establishing mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between organisations and their stakeholders (Sancar, 2016).

Communication within an organisation, often regarded as internal communication, is an important aspect of the overall communication of that organisation. Though different aspects of corporate communication add to the overall communication of an organisation, internal communication stands out since several studies have shown that organisations with robust internal communication have better-performing staff (Musheke & Phiri, 2021; Dhone & Sarwoko, 2022). Academics and practitioners have defined internal communication from different standpoints, but some keywords are prevalent in many of them. They include relationship management within organisations (Ledingham and Ledingham, 2015), communication among employees in an organisation using words effectively to communicate ideas (Sarmiento-Guede, et al., 2018), thoughts and decisions, and meaningful interactions between management and employees of an organisation.

Though the term internal communication is used throughout this research as preferred by communication theorists like Stehle (2023) and Verčič, Verčič & Špoljarić (2022). It is important to note that some literature uses alternative names for it, and sometimes interchangeably. Welch and Jackson (2007) have pointed out several of these alternative nomenclatures include: internal relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984); employee communication (Argenti, 1996); internal communications (Cornelissen, 2004); employee relations (Quirke, 2000); internal public relations (Jefkins, 1988), and staff communication (Stone, 1995).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Organisations that have strategic internal communication often motivate their staff by the way they communicate (Adetipe, 2020). This is made better by the roles the communicators play and the channels they use. To determine the nature of internal communication it is often necessary to hinge it on appropriate theories that provide a proper footing and a basis on which to rest. These theories should be appropriate in reflecting on the nature of internal communication in organisations. Although many communication theories apply to internal corporate communication, the Media Richness Theory (MRT) also referred to as the Information Richness Theory (IRT) was postulated by Daft & Langel and seems to provide a better framework in this study (Ngugi, 2023).

The theory states that any medium chosen for communication can carry information in such a way that if the content is rich, the understanding is also rich for the receiver. The converse is also true. For example, if the channel of

communication is face-to-face, which they consider rich, the recipients of the message receive very rich communication. They thus classified different mediums based on their information-carrying capacity and whether they provide understanding and meaning for the receiver. Daft & Lengel (1984) and Daft & Lengel (1986) underlined that the richness of the MRT lies in the fact that communication should be clearly defined while having in mind the understanding of the receiver (Ching, Lee & Salazar, 2023; Ngugi, 2023). This should come from reducing uncertainties and ambiguities as well as equivocality that may arise. They concluded that their level of equivocality and uncertainty should determine media designation. Equivocality was explained as communication that is ambiguous, messy, paradoxical, and unclear as there were no answers directly available. They thus advised that rich media should be used for communication with high equivocality and lean media for those with lower equivocality.

Since the advent of the MRT, different researchers have studied it and made recommendations. He, et al. (2023) confirmed that communication is changing and that these changes take place, particularly in information creation, compilation, transmission, and storage. Ching, et al., (2023) stressed that communicators in organisations need to find ways to pass on their messages. To achieve this, they suggested that some uncertainty reduction mechanisms will have to be put in place. This reduction mechanism could be based on the four criteria of a rich media proposed in MRT – the speed of feedback, variety of communication channels employed with multiple cues (verbal or non-verbal expressions), *'Personalness'* of source, and richness of language. They highlighted that the theory proposes that individuals choose the communication channels that match the ambiguity level of the message that they want to communicate. Furthermore, they noted other challenges of MRT like the impact of the geographical separation of the communicators, time pressures that bind the communication, and unavailability of some recipients of the communication in computer-based networks.

A common criticism of MRT is that it does not consider the social and political context in which media choice decisions are made in organisations. The need for a much broader social and political framework to complement media richness theory arises. Webster and Trevino (1995) suggest that rational theories for media choice, such as media richness theory, should be complemented by social theories.

ORGANISATIONAL INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Internal Communication is that distinct strategic management role that is answerable for the total communication activities generated by an organisation for its internal stakeholders to establish, maintain, foster, and keep open lines of communication that are directed toward the overall strategic intent of the organisation. Internal Communication channels today range from traditional methods like notice boards, and town hall meetings to computer-assisted channels like video conferencing, emails, and social media platforms (Wuersch, Neher & Peter, 2023). Preferences for these channels differ depending on the knowledge of use, availability of tools, interconnectivity, and so on. The channels used by managers in an organisation for employees may not necessarily be the channels the employee prefers and vice versa.

This is sometimes evident where there is a demographic divide – the younger generation’s preferences may not necessarily be in tandem with those of the older generation (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b; Constantinescu-Dobra, & Coțiu, 2021). This does not only play a critical role in organisational sustainability but also implies strategic internal communication must be designed to establish a congruent platform of communication between employees and employers. There is no gainsaying the fact that internal communication that is properly done should lead to fostering employee engagement and thus, better success in organisational performance (Musheke & Phiri, 2021).

On the contrary, a study by Vokic and Vidovic (2015) revealed the differences in the preference for digital channels between Generation X and digital natives in Croatia are not significant. They found out that the preferences exhibited by Xers of “Human Touch” in communication apply to digital natives. The study reaffirms the view that considerable generational and demographic differences do not exist in organisations and recommends that there is no need for any special action to be taken toward relating channels to any generation. They concluded that there are more similarities than differences in the preferences of different generations. The research is profound, but the conclusions may not be universal for this will likely vary from organisation to organisation, and will depend on the sector, organisation culture, national culture, industry, exposure and adoption of new technology, availability of internet support – both human and technical, and other factors.

Likewise, the channel of communication impacts its effectiveness. Conrads and Lotz (2015) investigated the effects of various channels of communication on dishonest behaviour through simple truth-telling experiments. With a total of 246 participants from a pool of 2000 students, they found dishonest behaviour across all communication channels. However, the partial telling of lies decreased with the distance of communication and with anonymity. In another study, Men (2015) showed that a link exists between the CEO, communication, and the organisation’s image, reputation, and other attributes. The research was to determine the most frequently used channels by CEOs and to know the level of their presence on social media. Also, it looked at their style of communication, i.e., how assertive, or responsive they are while communicating with their employees. The determinants considered are ‘being good listeners, responsive, empathetic, compassionate, understanding, friendly, warm, sincere, and interested’.

In times of economic stress and challenges in achieving organisational goals, email is one of the commonest channels of communication as it is fast and can be read “on the go.” It can also have necessary details for both the sender and the receiver that can be read later and acted upon. However, it is common knowledge that both employees and employers must deal with email overload. This prompted the work of Pignata et al. (2015) to find out what leads to email overload and the strategies that staff use to manage it. Working with an Australian university with 193 academics and 278 professionals, a survey was conducted to achieve the research objectives. The choice of a university was attributed to the claim that email has changed the nature of communication in the institution. The researchers drew this decision because it facilitates

networking and collaboration between universities, academics, students, and other stakeholders.

The importance of internal communication for organisational sustenance cannot be overemphasised. Vora and Patra (2017) highlighted the positive effects and impact it has on long-term productivity and sustainability. The study sought to determine the relationship between internal communication and employee engagement, the key factors of employee engagement that lead to commitment and determine key factors of internal communication that drive and impact employee engagement in globally successful organisations. They carried out a semi-structured interview of 12 professionals working in different organisations across sectors. To further validate their result, they surveyed 50 respondents 23 years of age and above, including current employees and students with work experience. From the interviews, they found the following key points among many others: there is awareness of internal communication tools in organisations as most of the respondents are used to robust internal communication channels; there is a wide range of tools in use from traditional ones to the new media; internal communication has a direct impact on employee engagement.

With the ever-changing face of technology, internal communication practitioners have the challenge of channels to use, and which give the best result measured against those preferred by employees. Among all the available channels, social media has been studied to determine which should be deployed for what purpose, and the effect they would have on the goals of internal communication practices. It is for this reason that Ewing et al. (2019) have studied the value Internal social media (ISM) can have and how it affects employee engagement. Specifically, they explored the role ISM plays in engaging employees and what technology an organisation can use to achieve this. They conceptualise ISM as Enterprise Solution Media (i.e., a third-party design or proprietary social media like Yammer, discussion forums, video interfaces, blogs, etc.) and general social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, used internally).

CHANNELS OF ORGANISATIONAL INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

The channels of communication in organisations have changed in recent times not just because of the socio-political and economic environment but due to technological and generational changes (Lacarcel & Huete, 2023). While employers are focusing more and more on the bottom line, cost-cutting measures, and seeking overall corporate survival and sustainability. Employees, on the other hand, desire to have more meaning in their lives and many are worried about their jobs. This shaky and uncertain situation has led to a lack of trust and declining loyalty leading to employees seeking more information and control about their organisations. Employees want to be engaged, be part of the processes, be motivated, understand their roles, and are constantly looking for what is in employment for them. These factors have greatly influenced the recent change in organisational communication channels.

For instance, the work of Friedl and Verčič (2011) investigated the channels that are preferred by digital natives – those born approximately after 1980. They assessed the capabilities and expectations of respondents as well as their attitudes towards existing internal communication channels and new

communication channels. The research was an online survey of an IT multinational company, and out of the numerous copies of the questionnaire distributed, 310 were useable. It was found that for general organisational information, employees prefer email newsletters and intranet news to social media. They also found that employees born after 1980 visited social media sites a lot and used them sometimes for communication, but they do not prefer emails and intranet. It was also discovered that contrary to popular opinion, not all employees below the age of 30 are completely immersed in digital technology. It supports the view that age is not the real determinant of the adoption and usage of new communication technology.

In so many organisations, some of those born after 1990 and even after 2000 (maybe currently in schools but also undertaking internship programs, work/study activities, etc.) are already employees. It will be helpful to conduct this research for these new groups, as Friedl & Verčič have suggested. Besides, there is an unanswered question on whether those studied by them with an average age of 27 fall under the category of '*digital natives*'. The respondents to the questions are 68% males and 32% females. There was no mention of gender having any effect on the results. This calls for new considerations. Similarly, though the percentages of the nationalities sampled were mentioned, the specific areas for 13% of the respondents were not mentioned. There was no mention of the possible effects of cultural differences or early exposure to communication technology on the results.

Welch (2012) views internal communication as a pivot for organisational effectiveness if it is properly carried out using the right channel (s). The fact that poor internal communication may become counterproductive is undeniable. It is the author's understanding that doing internal communication properly through the appropriate channel (s) means having an appropriate message that will lead employees through mediums that are useful and acceptable. The work of Welch (2012) is on getting an insight into employees' preferences of channels used in a large UK higher educational institution. It emphasises that beneficial internal communication relies on appropriate messages reaching employees in formats useful and acceptable to them. Welch (2012) highlighted a few questions, comments, and resources on channel preferences: she wondered if employees have expectations of communication media that influence their evaluations of internal communication and if Internal communication can be facilitated by a range of media which, taking a receiver's point of view can be categorised by formats. Her results found these in the affirmative from her qualitative research carried out on a total of 64 staff in an academic institution comprising 28 academic and research staff and 36 support staff.

For internal media formats, it was found that electronic formats and channels were most preferred by 47% of the respondents including receipt of internal newsletters via email, PDF files, and via the organisation's intranet; 16% of the participants expressed a dual preference for both electronic and print. It will be interesting to find out why this group prefers blended channels. It is interesting to note that the driver for the preferences highlighted above is their concern about wasted resources and the financial costs of printed materials to which 69% responded as such. Another concern is environmental sustainability.

Other interesting results of this research abound, but all have emphasised the usefulness of considering the channels the employees prefer. This predicated a research question for the current study.

Some academic discussions have taken place on the need for the management of organisations to give room to listen to their employees. Many practitioners have realised from knowledge acquired from good and bad experiences that there is a need to listen to their employees. In the current days when their employees want to know more about their jobs, the organisation they work for, all forms of disclosures, and so on, managers may not have much choice other than to listen and hear their employees. With this as the background, Burris, Rockmann, and Kimmon (2017) sought to determine what employees speak about or should speak about, and the ways to implement them. More specifically, their framework included “identification,” which considered the employee’s profession and work unit, what they say (voice content), and how much value the management puts on them. For the voice content, they reflected on the importance of the issue being addressed, the resources needed to effect the recommended change, and the effects of such changes on things that are interdependent.

Using both quantitative and qualitative research in different measures, for each of their frameworks, they conducted the study in the emergency department of a large hospital in the United States. Amid finite results that they obtained, they could ascertain that employee voices varied on the content – those with strong voices often brought up issues related to the work and the managers’ perception of their implementations was varied. Though the complexities of this research are not required in the current study, it throws up the challenge for organisations of how important the employee voice is even if they do not want to consider it in detail as this work. More and more, there are calls for organisations to be mindful of the benefits of giving an ear to their employees. On the side of employees too, the level of awareness, and desire to learn, understand, and know the organisation they work for is important and on the increase. This led to the study of Emelifeonwu & Valk (2019) to investigate the state of employee voice in the Nigerian telecom industries.

With two multinational companies and a local one, they interviewed 30 employees. They found that culture was the most important factor that impacted the employee’s voices. However, the respondents proffered ways to manage this. It includes having town hall meetings, periodic meetings, meetings with the CEO, union intervention, team meetings, and other face-to-face activities. Another reason for low employee voice is the fear of losing one’s job. This is the fallout of the high unemployment rate in the study population. This report is of importance for multinationals based on its focus even though it may not be applicable in other areas. The work of Emelifeonwu and Valk (2019) could be criticised in the sense that it is founded on the assumption that low employee voice is prevalent in the study area and the industry. It would have helped if an initial investigation determined that a low voice exists and showed the extent.

ORGANISATIONAL INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA

Weaving through literature related to internal communication in Nigeria, Udegbe et al., (2012) identified that there could be a relationship between business communication and organisational performance and sustainability. They, therefore, studied Nigerian companies to see if there are relationships

with these variables. With a survey method, they investigated 100 small and large manufacturing and service companies operating in Lagos, Nigeria, to determine the extent to which they emphasise effective business communication; and determine the relative effectiveness in achieving set goals and objectives through business communication. With a total of 484 copies of their questionnaire received, the results were analysed. They found that effective business communication is emphasised in the organisations surveyed even though the extent of the “emphasis” is not clear for each organisation. It was also found that the extent of the practice of effective business communication was dependent on the type of organisation. Though this study is on business communication and not internal communication, it helps relate communication with performance. However, the research did not clearly state the nature of business communication as this is a wide subject on its own. Furthermore, there is the need to unbundle the companies since their diverse nature may not bring out salient differences that may arise based on the peculiarities of industries.

Gabriel and Gabriel (2014) followed these lines but specifically dealt with how internal communication affects the commitment of employees. They emphasised that, though commitment is of three types – Affective, Normative, and Continuance, they are investigating affective commitment. This is so because practitioners make it their choice since employees are emotionally identified with an organisation. The research, which was focused on five selected telecom companies in Nigeria by surveying 106 employees, showed that there is a substantial and effective commitment in the organisation. In other words, the employees in the organisations are emotionally attached to it because there is a robust internal communication system originating from employees’ knowledge of what happens in their organisations. It was also specifically noted that everyone is provided with the information they need to do their jobs through their Internal line managers, Internal team peers, Internal project peers, and Internal corporate communication (Welch & Jackson, 2007). The research concluded that these resulted in the employees having a sense of belonging, being involved, and being job-satisfied. They have affective commitment. This result brings to the fore the benefit of internal communication which is not one of the usual impacts of internal communication. Affective commitment serves to expand the role internal communication plays in organisations.

Organisations develop their businesses in such a way that they are strategic to achieve desired goals. It may include having a long-term view of its activities and progress. Unfortunately, few organisations address their internal communication as such. Internal communication strategies are usually reactive, i.e., developed to solve immediate issues like crises, events, and conflict. At other times when they are planned, it is to solve issues like major organisational changes, layoffs, technology changes, etc. It is a common practice that when such issues are over, internal communication is relegated to the background again thus facing “unorganised incoherent processes (Okuneye et al. 2014). Their research believes that why this phenomenon occurs in many organisations is a mystery. They opined that this could probably be so because they do not see the real value of internal communication or find it difficult to relate it with performance and the bottom line. This prompted them to test the hypothesis on the relationship between internal communication and organisational performance in some Nigerian companies. By survey, they distributed 100

questionnaires to managers in 100 Nigerian companies. They found a strong correlation between internal communication strategy and organisational performance. They extrapolated this result and concluded that it is strongly correlated with profitability.

Nwokah and Hamilton-Ibama (2016) studied how internal communication influences market orientation in mobile telecom companies in Nigeria. They followed available market orientation literature and hinged their research on certain perspectives. The decision-making perspective is where it is expected that all marketing information should permeate all corporate functions and be available inter-functionally and interdependently. The culture perspective is where all marketing behaviour is entrenched in the organisational culture. They sought to determine if there is any relationship between internal communication and customer focus, internal communication and competitor focus, and internal communication and inter-functionality and interdependency.

They surveyed 374 employees in four telecom companies and found that there is a very high relationship between internal communication and customers' focus. This means that the higher the internal communication measures, the higher the customer focuses. A similar highly positive relationship exists between internal communication and competitor focus meaning that focus on competition is dependent on the ability to exchange both informal and formal information between management and employees. Because there are some positive results for inter-functional coordination, the authors infer that internal communication plays a very significant role in market orientation. They advised operators to be mindful of this and therefore enhance the quality of their informal and formal information exchanges between management and employees. This is good research in terms of its results and the gap it fills in the literature. However, no mention was made of the nature, conditions, and attributes of the internal communication that was measured. The channels for employee/management communication were not discussed and the likelihood of the impact of employee feedback was downplayed.

The study of Ugoani (2016) was principally on human resources to determine if there is any relationship between employee turnover and productivity in small business enterprises in Nigeria. The aspect related to the current work is the emphasis of the author on the importance of internal communication. He thinks that high employee turnover can be reduced by good internal communication and therefore should not be ignored. Though he did not define what good internal communication means, he suggested that it ensures that employees are allowed to voice out their suggestions and fears, and depending on the organisation, they may accede to the comment by acting on it. Bodunde et al. (2017) have synthesised an encompassing definition of communication from the literature they reviewed. They likened internal and external communication to blood that flows in humans. It was defined as a process of creating, transmitting, disseminating, and interpreting ideas, facts, messages, opinions, feelings, and information between one person and another.

CONCLUSION

This research has brought to the fore, like so many others, the importance of communication in organisations. Communication is the livewire of every activity and therefore its management is very important for organisational

performance and sustenance. Cascading it downwards towards specific communication efforts carried out by organisations, internal communication stands out because the way it is done creates the atmosphere for employees to become well-informed, and are ultimately led through the route of engagement, satisfaction, motivation, and commitment that will eventually lead to organisation success. As divulged, internal communication in Nigerian organisations is therefore on a roadmap towards meeting the global best practices. While some of these organisations can be said to be ‘doing internal communication’ others need to brace up and be more proactive. Since most of these organisations recognise and understand its meaning and what it can do for the organisation, what is left is to develop willpower, and then draw the numerous benefits, especially from their employees to guarantee their organisational success.

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Mike Okolo has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work in the format submitted to Pan-Atlantic University Press.