

Relevant Communication Channels: Effective Information Transfer in Employee Communication

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Abstract

Employee communication is in upheaval: due to digitalisation employees today are confronted with a plethora of internal communication channels. Followingly, its core purpose is challenged - that is, to inform employees effectively so that they align with the company's strategy and increase loyalty, trust and identification with it. The purpose can be achieved when the appropriate channels are used so that employees are gathering the information relevant to them. Based on this, three theses are formulated. Up until today, empirical research on the effectiveness of channels is scarce. The theses' plausibility is checked through a survey conducted in three large Swiss companies. The almost 900 completed questionnaires were statistically analysed. The results show that personal conversation as a communication channel plays a central role when it comes to achieve the purpose of employee communication. A surprising finding is that older employees are more inclined towards digital channels than younger ones.

Keywords: Employee communication, communication channels, touchpoints, information process, digitalisation

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM DEFINITION

Conveying information is the central task of employee communication. Studies show that well-informed employees identify more strongly with their employer, align more with the organisational strategy, have more trust and promote the organisational culture (Ihm, 2015; Jäggi & Egli, 2007).

Through digitalisation the number of communication channels towards employees, so called touchpoints, have greatly increased in the last decade. This impairs the clarity of the communication channels and their effectiveness in terms of whether and how the addressees are appropriately reached (e.g. Kovaite et al., 2020; Volnhals & Hirsch, 2008).

Frenzel et al. (2008) and Junghanns & Kersten (2019) have identified an information overload in German companies, which is a cause for complaint among the employees. But at the same time - and this is the paradox - employees are demanding more information. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that employees do not find the information relevant to them despite the increasing number of new touchpoints.

To ensure effective employee communication, it is necessary to focus on a few, but relevant communication channels. For a message to reach employees effectively, the communication has to be delivered through the right channel and at the right moment. Only then it can be expected to have well-informed employees and thus to achieve communicational purposes (see theory).

So far, however, it is not clear which touchpoints these are. Therefore, we pose the following guiding research question:

Which communication channels are relevant for providing information to employees in order to keep them up to date effectively?

Any form of employee communication is effective and thus successful when employees in their information journey are gathering relevant information and take decisions based on this. The touchpoints play an important role thereby (Spengler & Oehl, 2019). Thus, more knowledge concerning communication channels may help companies to reach their employees in a more effective way.

The importance of employee communication for corporate success has long been recognised by practitioners (Meng & Berger, 2010), but from the perspective of the scientific community, there is still a considerable need for research (e.g. Grunig & Repper, 1992; Yeomans, 2006). Systematic studies on the effectiveness of touchpoints in employee communication have been rare so far. Einwiller, Klöfer & Nies (2009) presented an early catalogue of communication channels. Rolke & Zerfass (2010) provided a framework for a communication-controlling. The framework allows a comprehensive overview over the communication process from resources spent for external and employee communication (budget, personnel) to their impact in the form of brand value etc. However, the single proposed categories in the framework are overall on a quite general level and not as concrete as touchpoints.

Moreover, Spengler & Oehl (2019) postulate that besides the importance of touchpoints for an effective employee communication also the subgroups of employees (types of employees) as well as the communication content to play an elementary role for a successful communication. Those two elements are not part of this paper because its focus is on communication channels. Indeed, in a second part of our study we have examined types of employees. The results thereto will be presented in a separate paper.

The present paper is structured as follows: The theory section is dedicated to defining the relevant concepts and formulating the theses to be tested. Subsequently, the data and the research methods are presented. This is followed by the presentation and interpretations of the results of the empirical analysis.

The paper concludes with a summary of the key findings as well as an outlook on possible consequences for the everyday practice of employee communication.

THEORY

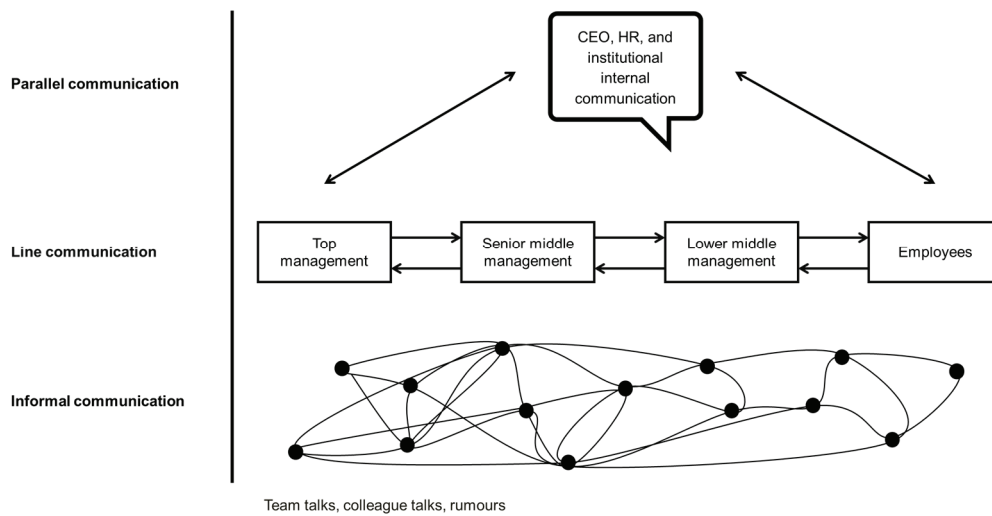
Employee communication and touchpoints (channels)

Employee communication can be understood as all formal and informal communication processes between employees which are significantly shaped by the company (Stohl, 1995; Theis-Berglmair, 2003). According to Jäggi & Egli (2007) and Ihm (2015), employee communication must essentially fulfil the following four purposes: *alignment of employees with the organisational strategy, optimising employee loyalty, increasing employees' identification with and trust in the organisation and, promoting and developing the organisational culture*. These functions can be found in different degrees of priority also in other literature (Jiang & Luo, 2017; Mast, 2016).

To get in contact and aiming to fulfil these four purposes every company has a variety of ways to get in touch with its employees. Depending on the definition, there can quickly be over 100 touchpoints. A touchpoint is any point of contact between a company and its employees. The spectrum can range from a notice board, reporting in a newspaper to informal conversations between work colleagues (Spengler & Oehl, 2019, p. 175). Jäggi & Egli (2007, p. 14) speak of three forms of employee communication (see figure 1).

In the first form "employee communication can be understood as part of management work, i. e. classic *line communication* top-down or bottom-up from hierarchy level to hierarchy level". One example is the conversation between employees and supervisors. Secondly, Jäggi & Egli (2007) speak of *informal employee communication*. This form includes all employee information flows that fundamentally elude a more systematic order and bypass hierarchies and working groups. This comprise, for example, conversations among work colleagues. Rumours are also part of informal communication. The third form is the so-called *parallel communication*. This is the primarily top-down employee communication task carried out by an institutional communication department. However, this also includes CEO communication. All three types of parallel communication provide employees with information beyond the individual levels of the line organisation. Concrete examples include intranet posts on corporate strategy, greetings from the CEO at festive days or information on changes in working conditions.

Figure 1: The three characteristics of employee communication



Source: Jäggi & Egli (2007, p. 14).

To find out which actually are the perceived most important touchpoints, the authors led several focus group discussions with heads of communication in large Swiss companies. The statements in the discussion showed that personal communication – a part of the informal employee communication – is (again) becoming more important. Indeed, digital channels in employee communication are increasingly optimised and professionalised. Nevertheless, the assumption that "personal communication is the most effective form of information transmission" (Mast 2002, p. 28) still seems to prevail. These considerations lead to the postulation of the first thesis of this study:

T1: Personal conversation is the most effective form of employee communication.

As already mentioned, however, digital and formal touchpoints have long since established themselves in the employee communication of companies. Typical channels of employee communication have been digitised or have at least received a digital add-on, such as the staff newspaper or the information letter (Eicke 2018, p. 71). The increasing importance of digital channels in employee communication is undisputed according to Eicke (2018), with their relevance now exceeding that of analogue channels. In the beginning there were e.g. e-mails, e-newsletters, intranet as classic forms of digital employee communication (Speck 2021). But with advancing digitalisation, other channels for employee communication like e.g. internal blogs, CEO-videos or interactive tools/media have long since been introduced. This consideration leads to the postulation of the second thesis:

T2: The digital touchpoints or communication channels are more relevant in employee communication than the analogue touchpoints.

The young generation of workers in particular is characterised by a high level of digital competence (Maas, 2021, p. 55). This generation has grown up with a variety of digital channels and thus brings with them a high affinity for using digital channels. This consideration leads to the postulation of the third thesis:

T3: The younger an employee is, the more likely he or she is to use digital channels.

METHODOLOGY

To do so a survey was developed and was therefore aimed at employees (see next section). The methodological procedure and the approaches used are explained in more detail in the following sub-chapters.

Quantitative survey

The aim of the quantitative study is to assess the touchpoint usage and the theses on the basis of the statements of the employees. To do so, a written online survey was conducted for the data collection. The questionnaire was designed and published online in the participating companies, which were Swiss Federal Railways (SBB), Lindt & Sprüngli AG and Clariant AG. We did the survey with the provider “SoSci Survey”. The data collection took place between 1 March 2021 and 31 March 2021 inclusive. The survey took an average of 18 minutes (median) to complete. Since the requested employees decided themselves whether or not to participate in the survey, this was a case of self-recruitment (opt-in). A total of 889 fully completed questionnaires¹ were generated.

In the first part of the questionnaire, there was a short introduction to the basic topic of the survey study. Subsequently, a touchpoint list was then presented to the participants, which they had to fill according to various criteria. The last part of the survey included the questioning of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Creation of the communication channel list

The compilation of the touchpoint list is based on literature (Meier & Jäggi, 2020; Einwiller, Klöfer & Nies 2009) on the one hand and on empirical data from practice on the other. Jäggi & Egli's (2007, p. 14) three types of employee communication - line communication, informal communication and parallel communication - served as the theoretical basis for the development of the touchpoint list. Based on this, 49 touchpoints (e. g. company regulations, personal conversations with colleagues, noticeboard and company website) were identified.

Measuring the information process of employees

To capture the information process of the employees, the established concept of the "customer journey" was used (Spengler & Oehl, 2019, p. 175). The concept serves to obtain answers to the theses. The information journey is the process that an employee follows before taking a decision or forming an opinion that e.g. supports trust and the identification with the company among others (see the four purposes of employee communication in the theory section). In the survey, participants were able to select and evaluate the touchpoints they used.

The touchpoints support employees in gathering information and making decisions. We used a five-phase model to map the importance of single touchpoints in the different phases. Basically, the first two phases are about gathering information, the last three about making (conscious or unconscious) decisions (i.e. e.g. to increase identification with the company). This approach was validated by Accelerom together with the Institute for Communication Science and Media Research at the University of Zurich (IKMZ) and has proven itself in practice for over ten years. Survey participants rated the touchpoints for all five phases on a scale from 0 (not informative, helpful, attractive) to 100 (very informative, helpful, attractive). The five phases are as follows:

1. *Awareness*: Where and how did you become aware of this issue?

¹ Of the participating employees, 73.9% are men, 25.5% women and 0.6% diverse. The average age is 50 years.

2. *Consideration*: What opportunities did you use to get more information?
3. *Exploration*: How informative or credible do you consider these contact options to be?
4. *Impact on behaviour*: How helpful are these contact possibilities ultimately in enabling people to make decisions?
5. *Bonding*: How satisfied are you with these possibilities?

The first two phases (awareness and consideration) of the customer journey provide insight into the passive and active reach of a touchpoint (in percentage points). While passive reach answers the question of which touchpoints attract employees' attention, active reach reflects which touchpoints employees use to obtain information. The three subsequent phases of the information journey (exploration, impact on behaviour, bonding) map the relevance and show which touchpoints are rated as informative, helpful and attractive (scale ranges from 0 to 100 points). This three-dimensional recording of the relevance of a touchpoint corresponds to the recognised tripartite attitude model from persuasion research.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

In the following, the results to the empirical investigation are presented. In this context, the results on the individual theses are presented in turn.

Central touchpoints in information journey of the employees

As mentioned, the information journey describes the information process that an employee goes through before making a decision or forming an opinion. Depending on the phase of the information journey, different touchpoints play a central role. Table 1 shows the most important touchpoints per phase from the view of survey-participating employees.

Table 1: Information journey of the employees

Awareness	Consideration	Exploration	Impact on behaviour	Bonding
1. Talk with superiors	1. Intranet	1. Talk with superiors	1. Talk with superiors	1. Talk with colleagues
2. Intranet	2. Talk with superiors	2. Talk with CEO	2. Talk with colleagues	2. Talk with superiors
3. Talk with colleagues	3. Talk with colleagues	3. Meeting	3. Talk with CEO	3. Talk with family / friends
4. Internal news portal	4. Video of CEO	4. Talk with colleagues	4. Meeting	4. Talk with CEO
5. Video of CEO	5. Internal news portal	5. Video of CEO	5. Talk with family / friends	5. Meeting

Source: Own representation.

The information process' 5 phases together with the results to touchpoints can be interpreted as follows:

1. *Awareness*: The awareness phase shows which touchpoints attract attention. This first phase of the information process is characterised by personal conversations (supervisors, colleagues) and the employee company platform - the intranet. Across all the touchpoints examined, the personal conversation with the supervisor achieves the highest value in this phase. 52% of the people surveyed became aware of this touchpoint.

2. *Consideration*: The Consideration phase shows which touchpoints are actively used to get more information (e.g. research, discuss, comment). This phase is dominated by the touchpoint intranet. This touchpoint achieves a value of 68%. This means that almost 68% of the employees surveyed use this touchpoint to obtain more information.
3. *Exploration*: The exploration phase shows which touchpoints are evaluated as informative or credible. In this phase, the touchpoints related to the personal conversation play an important role. The touchpoint interview with the supervisor achieves the highest score (mean) in this phase with 84 (the scale goes from 0 (not at all informative / not at all credible) to 100 points (very informative / very credible)).
4. *Impact on behaviour*: The "Impact on behaviour" phase shows which touchpoints help form decisions and opinions. In this phase, the touchpoints around the personal conversation are found repeatedly. But touchpoints such as training and coaching are also relevant touchpoints in this phase (Top 10).
5. *Bonding*: The last phase of the information process - the bonding phase - indicates which touchpoints have a high level of satisfaction. Here are the top 3 touchpoints: Conversation with colleagues, conversation with superiors and conversation with family/friends.

Relevance of the personal conversation

The personal conversation with superiors or colleagues scores very high in all phases of the information process (table 2). For example, conversation with a supervisor or work colleagues - whether in a team meeting or one-to-one - is perceived to have wide reach and relevance when it comes to changing an opinion or behaviour. Personal conversation is understood primarily as a part of the informal communication. But, in the form of talks with superiors may also has aspects of line communication (see theory and figure 1).

Table 2: Relevance of the personal conversation

Awareness	Consideration	Exploration	Impact on behaviour	Bonding
1. Talk with superiors	1. Intranet	1. Talk with superiors	1. Talk with superiors	1. Talk with colleagues
2. Intranet	2. Talk with superiors	2. Talk with CEO	2. Talk with colleagues	2. Talk with superiors
3. Talk with colleagues	3. Talk with colleagues	3. Meeting	3. Talk with CEO	3. Talk with family / friends
4. Internal news portal	4. Video of CEO	4. Talk with colleagues	4. Meeting	4. Talk with CEO
5. Video of CEO	5. Internal news portal	5. Video of CEO	5. Talk with family / friends	5. Meeting

Source: Own representation.

Thus, we designate the first thesis (T1) to be plausible:

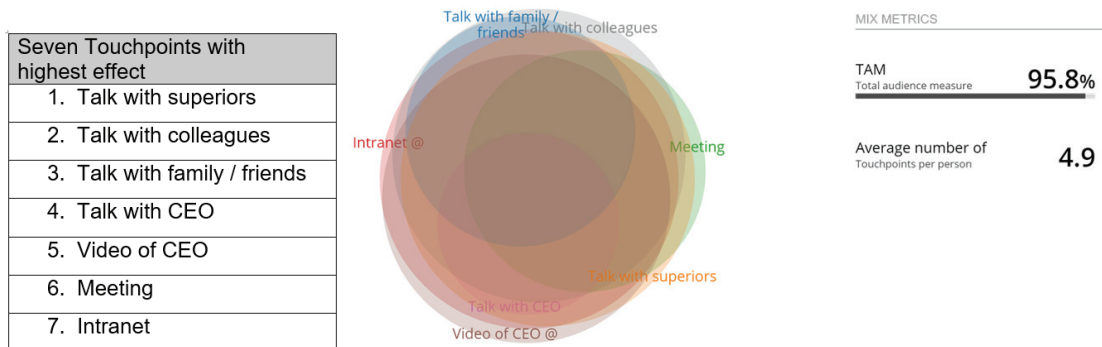
T1: Personal conversation is the most effective form of employee communication.

Optimal solutions - so-called touchpoint mixes - can be derived from the collected data. In this context, it is interesting to see which combination of touchpoints, for example, can optimally cover the information process of the employees. We applied an algorithm that compares the effect of millions of touchpoint combinations with each other and calculates which measures achieve the highest effect on employees (Spengler & Oehl, 2019, pp. 181-182).

The seven touchpoints that were identified as algorithm-based touchpoints (see figure 4) are *talk with superiors*, *talk with colleagues*, *talk with CEO*, *Video of CEO*, *Meeting*, *intranet*. 95.8% of employees are reached by these seven touchpoints, and on average they come into contact with just under 5 (4.9 in figure 2) touchpoints.

These seven key touchpoints, which were determined on the basis of the optimisation algorithm, once again underline the central importance of the touchpoints around the personal conversation.

Figure 2: Algorithm-based identification of key touchpoints



Source: Own representation.

Digital channels in employee communication

The second thesis postulated the following presumption:

T2: The digital touchpoints or communication channels are more relevant in employee communication than the analogue touchpoints.

As mentioned, a total of 49 touchpoints were examined. Of these, 21 were digital touchpoints and 28 were analogue touchpoints. To test this thesis, the number of analogue touchpoints used was compared with the digital channels used.

On average, employees use a total of 21 touchpoints (mean value) to inform themselves about a topic or to form an opinion. These 21 touchpoints consist of the following: 10 touchpoints are digital (47.62%) and 11 touchpoints are analogue (52.38%).

Thus employees use analogue and digital channels in a balanced way. A clear preference for digital channels cannot be recognised. For this reason, the second thesis cannot be designated plausible.

Despite this equal use of touchpoints, there is an assumption that younger employees, in particular, have a stronger preference for digital touchpoints:

T3: The younger an employee is, the more likely they are to use digital touchpoints.

To test this thesis, the relation between the use of digital channels and age was examined with a regression analysis (see table 3, Model 1). A significant correlation can be seen between the use of digital channels and increasing age (0.09***). This means that as people get older, they also use more digital channels. This refutes the prejudice that young equals digital.

However, people with increasing age use more communication channels on average than younger people overall (i.e. digital *and* analogue). The mean value of the average touchpoints used differs between the age groups: While 16-30-year-olds use an average of 18 touchpoints, people aged 56+ overuse an

average of 23 touchpoints. This difference is significant (p-value < 0.05). The data hence show that employees generally use more touchpoints with increasing age. This finding can also be interpreted that younger employees are generally less informed, while older employees are more attentive to new information.

Consequently, based on the analysed data, the third thesis cannot be considered plausible.

Table 3: Regression analysis for communication channel use

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>Estimates</i>
Intercept	14.05 ***	5.72 ***	8.33 ***
Sex	1.02	0.49	0.53
Age	0.14 ***	0.09 ***	0.05 *
Observations	874	874	874
R2 / R2 adjusted	0.016 / 0.014	0.035 / 0.032	0.006 / 0.004

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Explanation: Model 0 (use of all touchpoints), Model 1 (use of digital touchpoints) and Model 2 (use of analogue touchpoints)².

Source: Own representation.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the introduction, in today's world, employees are confronted with an immense volume of information (e.g. Volnhals & Hirsch, 2008). The need of the hour is to simplify and focus: the aim of employee communication should be to focus on a few but relevant touchpoints to ensure effective communication with employees.

The results of our empirical study show that personal conversation with supervisors and colleagues plays, as postulated, still a central role. These touchpoints achieve top scores in all five phases of the information process. Thus, conversations with superiors or colleagues are experienced as extremely credible and relevant when it comes to achieve the purposes of the employee communication like aligning with employees with a company's strategy or increasing loyalty and trust.

A very surprising finding of the survey is that older employees are more inclined towards digital channels than younger ones. This refutes the prejudice that young equals digital (as postulated in these two). This finding can also be interpreted to mean that younger employees are generally less informed, while older employees are more attentive to new information.

² In the model, n=15 persons could not be taken into account because these persons did not state their gender.

So what implications do the results of the study have for practice? We presented the results to a group of ten heads of communication in survey-participating corporations and beyond for discussion. They agreed that the employee communication channels managed by them (intranet, information event, etc.) do create awareness for an issue, but this is not enough to bring employees to change their opinion and behaviour. To achieve this (and thus the purposes of employee communication) it needs talks with superiors and colleagues. This is where the greatest potential of employee communication is recognised. However, the way to achieve this seems long, concepts for this are uncommon in practice, often resources are lacking. But without the inclusion of employee communication in internal networks, corporate communication will not succeed in establishing a truly value-added internal exchange.

Overall, it should be noted that due to different methodological limitations, the findings presented can only be considered preliminary. The extent to which the findings actually correspond to a representative distribution of all employees cannot be conclusively assessed on the basis of this analysis. Nevertheless, this paper can be seen as the first step in this direction to better understand the touchpoint use of employees.

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