ESSACHESS – Journal for Communication Studies

The Future of Internal Communication in the Light of the Events Observed during the Covid-19 Crisis

ESSACHESS –
Journal for Communication Studies
Volume 14 Issue 2(28), p. 59-80
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https://www.essachess.com/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21409/cme5-wr03

Cite: HORLAIT, D., & LAMBOTTE, F. (2021). The Future of Internal Communication in the Light of the Events Observed during the Covid-19 Crisis. *ESSACHESS*. https://doi.org/10.21409/CME5-WR03

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Abstract: The recent crisis of Covid-19, including its long-term nature and the new working practices it has generated, has highlighted the importance of internal communication in line with the needs of the internal publics in organizations and thus prompted us to question the evolution of the role and practices of internal communication professionals. We propose to address these issues in the light of the events observed in our quantitative and qualitative surveys about the employees' experiences of internal communication during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Belgium. The results of our survey led to a particular segmentation of internal publics in organizations based on their working reality and their perception of different risks. The issue of segmentation of internal publics has been little explored

Article received on the March 17, 2021. Article accepted on the October 20, 2021.
Conflict of Interest: The author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

by researchers, yet it appears crucial in helping communication professionals understand the specificities of their publics and adapting their strategies to the needs of these publics. Another key finding of our research concerns the growing importance of managerial communication. In this respect, the role of communication professionals in supporting managers deserves to be questioned.

Keywords: internal communication, internal public relations, internal publics, internal publics segmentation, internal communication practitioners

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Le futur de la communication interne au regard des événements observés durant la crise du Covid-19

Résumé : La récente crise du Covid-19, son ancrage dans le temps et les nouvelles pratiques de travail qu'elle a engendrées, ont mis en évidence l'importance d'une communication interne en phase avec les besoins des publics internes et nous invite à nous questionner sur l'évolution du rôle et des pratiques des professionnels de la communication interne. Nous proposons d'aborder ces questions au regard des événements observés lors de nos enquêtes quantitative et qualitative sur l'expérience de la communication interne des employés lors de la première vague de l'épidémie de Covid-19 en Belgique. Les résultats de notre enquête ont notamment conduit à l'émergence d'une segmentation particulière des publics internes de l'organisation basée sur leur situation de travail et la perception de différents risques. Cette question de la segmentation des publics internes a été peu explorée par les chercheurs, pourtant elle apparait cruciale pour aider les professionnels à comprendre les spécificités de leurs publics et adapter leurs stratégies de communication à leurs besoins. Un autre résultat clé de notre recherche concerne l'importance grandissante de la communication managériale. A cet égard, le rôle des professionnels de la communication dans l'accompagnement des managers mérite d'être questionné.

Mots-clés : communication interne, relations publiques internes, publics internes, segmentation des publics internes, professionnels de la communication interne

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Introduction

The recent crisis of Covid-19, including its long-term nature and the new working practices it has generated, has highlighted the importance of aligning internal communication with the needs of internal publics in organizations, and invited us to question the evolution of both the role and practices of internal communication professionals. From an operational role of transmitting information to a strategic role of maintaining the social link between employees, communication professionals have played a crucial role in organizations during the Covid-19 crisis.

During the first lockdown period in Belgium, we conducted quantitative and qualitative surveys to measure the internal communication experience of employees. In these surveys, employees generally expressed a high level of satisfaction with internal communication. The results showed that they appreciated a certain return to the fundamentals of internal communication: clear, honest, and transparent communication, the use of effective communication channels, and attention paid to employees' needs. The results also led to a new segmentation of employees with different levels of satisfaction and specific needs in terms of internal communication. This research conducted during a time of crisis has thus highlighted the importance for communication professionals to understand the internal publics and their specificities in order to manage relationships with them and develop appropriate communication strategies. Yet, little research has focused specifically on how to segment the internal publics of organizations.

In this article, we propose a reflection on the future of internal communication and the evolution of the practices of internal communication professionals in relation to the realities and the risk perceptions of the diverse internal publics of organizations. In the first part of the article, we review the relevant literature about the segmentation of internal publics and the future challenges for internal communication professionals. Next, we present the methodology used to collect our data and the main findings of our survey. In the last section, we discuss the implications of our findings for the evolution of internal communication practices.

1. The Place of Internal Communication within Public Relations

Due to its "complex and multidisciplinary nature" (Kalla, 2005, p. 303), internal communication has been studied and defined across different disciplines. Today, internal communication is notably torn between researchers who see it evolving as an independent field that enriches the public relations literature (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012) and those who consider it an important public relations research specialty (Lee & Yue, 2020; Toth, 2009; Welch, 2015). Grunig and colleagues define internal communication as "a specialized sub-discipline of communication that examines how people communicate in organizations and the nature of effective communication systems in organizations" (Grunig et al., 2002, p. 486). More recently, Lee and Yue proposed an adapted definition of internal communication from this public relations perspective as

> "the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels within the organization through different communication processes including business communication, management communication, organizational communication, corporate communication, and strategic communication" (Lee & Yue, 2020, p. 2).

Although considered as a sub-discipline of public relations, internal communication has long been understudied in the field of public relations, which has focused more on external organizational audiences and stakeholders (Tkalac Verčič

et al., 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Yeomans & FitzPatrick, 2017). For the past 10 years, however, we have observed a renewed interest in internal communication research (also called "internal relations" or "internal public relations") from public relations researchers (Lee & Yue, 2020; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012).

Coming back to the essence of the PR concept, we find at the heart of most definitions of public relations the idea of establishing and managing relationships with an organization's publics (Libaert & Catellani, 2014). In theorizing the four models of public relations, Grunig and Hunt (1984) described the "two-way symmetrical" model, which emphasizes the idea of mutual understanding between the organization and its publics, as the ideal communication situation. This model involves listening and dialogue that creates and sustains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its key publics. In this PR model, which is considered by the authors to be the most sophisticated and ethical one, the role of the public relations practitioner is to act as a liaison between the organization and its key publics, breaking with the previous view of the practitioner as persuader. While many organizations still follow the "one-way communication" perspective in their practices, this two-way symmetrical model is increasingly recognized as the best one for internal communication in order to give employees the voice they expect, notably through the growing use of interactive and conversational tools (Men & Bowen, 2016).

Cutlip and colleagues emphasize "the various publics on whom its [the organization] success or failure depends" (Cutlip et al., 2000, p. 2). In their seminal work, Grunig and Hunt discuss the differences between internal and external audiences, highlighting the opportunities for organizations in relation to their internal publics (Ruck & Yaxley, 2017). However, Grunig (1992) notes that "in spite of all of this research, we emerge with little theoretical understanding of how internal communication makes organizations more effective" (p. 557 cited in Welch & Jackson, 2007, p. 178). In a recent publication, Cardwell and colleagues point out that most research has focused on how to develop mutually beneficial relationships with external audiences, "yet little research has explored the internal communication processes that corporate PR practitioners face on a daily basis and how those internal interactions shape the practitioner's role" (Cardwell et al., 2017, p. 152).

Several authors have highlighted the importance for internal communication professionals to understand the diversity of internal audiences that exist within their organizations (Cox Edmondson et al., 2009; Yeomans & FitzPatrick, 2017) and to move into a more strategic role of managing internal relationships (Cardwell et al., 2017). Addressing the diversity of audiences brings us back to the issue of publics segmentation. In the following section, we propose to review in more detail some studies focusing on the segmentation of internal audiences.

2. The Segmentation of Internal Publics

The issue of publics segmentation appears to be crucial to helping PR practitioners to develop communication strategies and build relationships between the organization

and its diverse publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Kim, 2011). Publics segmentation consists of "dividing a population, market, or audience into groups whose members are more like each other than members of other segments" (Grunig, 1989, p. 202).

Among the best-known works on the segmentation of publics relate to the "situational theory of publics" developed by Grunig (1984, 1997). The author suggested that publics can be identified on the basis of three independent variables (*problem recognition*, *constraint recognition*, and *level of involvement*) and two dependent variables (activeness and passiveness of communication behavior, also called information seeking and information processing). Grunig proposed classifying the publics into four groups: *non-public* (when the organization has no impact on the group, and the group has no impact on the organization), *latent public* (when the group faces a similar situation but does not recognize that a problem exists), *aware public* (when the group recognizes that there is a problem), and *active public* (when the group does something about the problem) (Grunig, 1997; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This situational theory of publics has been not only used in public relations research but also by practitioners. However, it seems to have been little applied in the analysis of internal publics.

While public relations researchers have identified different types of variables (demographic, behavioral, etc.) for segmenting external audiences, little research has specifically focused on the segmentation of internal publics (Men & Bowen, 2016; Suh & Lee, 2016). Yet, the workforce within organizations today appears to be increasingly diverse. Employees are hired under different types of contracts, occupy a wide range of jobs, belong to different generations, are more or less skilled with technology, are sometimes spread over different geographical areas, and so on. However, some authors, such as L'Etang (2005), have deplored the fact that "employees are too often treated as a single public" (p. 522 cited in Welch & Jackson, 2007) in the internal communication literature in public relations.

To address this criticism, Welch and Jackson proposed to reconsider internal communication from a stakeholder perspective, as

> "the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders within organizations across a number of interrelated dimensions, including internal line manager communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication, and internal corporate communication" (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p. 184).

In order to appreciate the diversity of internal stakeholder groups, the authors conceptualized an internal communication matrix based on four dimensions: *line management* (superior-subordinate, communication occurs at every level within the organizations); *team peer* (involves employees and managers in a team situation); *project peer* (involves colleagues working together on particular projects); and *internal corporate communication* ("communication between an organization's strategic managers and its internal stakeholders, designed to promote commitment to

the organization, a sense of belonging to it, awareness of its changing environment and an understanding of its evolving aims") (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p. 186). The authors suggested that this multidimensional approach could help in internal situational analysis and the strategic planning of internal communication (Welch, 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007).

In a recent study, Suh and Lee pointed out "the need for sophisticated strategy to manage a diverse workforce" (Suh & Lee, 2016, p. 454). The authors proposed to manage diversity in internal communication by using the concept of segmentation as an intermediate tool. In particular, the authors questioned the set of variables to be used to appropriately segment a body of employees. Given their focus on the diversity of the workforce on the one hand, and the current market segmentation practices on the other, the authors justified the use of a simple demographic segmentation based on a few variables such as gender, years of tenure, educational level, and age.

In their book *Excellence in Internal Communication Management*, Men and Bowen (2016) examined in detail the different ways of segmenting internal publics. The authors highlighted that one commonly used approach is based on the hierarchical structure of an organization. This hierarchical segmentation groups employees according to their position at the different levels of the organization: frontline workers, line managers, middle-level management, top management, and board of directors. The authors stated that depending on their position in the hierarchical structure, it is possible to identify specific communication needs and purposes for each group of employees. They also indicated that the segmentation of internal publics can be based on other criteria, namely demographic, behavioral, psychographic or attitudinal variables. More readily observable demographic variables are also used frequently and include "age, gender, education, qualifications, ethnicity, income, work tenure, job classification, physical location and employment status" (Men & Bowen, 2016, p. 30). Employees can also be segmented through psychographics factors, such as "personalities, values, attitudes, social needs, culture interests, desires, work styles, career focuses or desired career benefits, and entertainment preferences" (Men & Bowen, 2016, p. 36). However, the authors specified that these variables are less easily observable and need to be measured to allow for segmentation. Further, the segmentation of internal audiences can be based on behavioral variables, such as "media consumption habits, involvement and engagement levels, organizational citizenship behaviors, adoption stages in new initiatives or changes" (Men & Bowen, 2016, p. 36). However, the authors conclude that there are "no rules or solid lines" regarding the segmentation of internal audiences.

Scholars interest in the issues of segmentation of internal publics/stakeholders seems relatively recent. Therefore, the few authors who have addressed these questions have encouraged further research in this area. Men and Bowen (2016) for instance recommended that researchers study the criteria to be used for segmenting internal publics, the factors that can determine stakeholders' level of engagement in issues of the organization, and how big data can help to analyze and segment internal publics. Suh and Lee (2016) suggest further refining the understanding of internal

communication and developing advanced techniques to better manage diversity. The authors plan to study another type of segmentation based on values, attitudes, working styles, and task orientations. They emphasize that a consciousness of diversity can result in positive changes at different levels of the organization. Welch (2012) also encourage taking diversity into account and point out that poor communication that ignores this diversity can be counterproductive and harm organizational relationships.

Faced with the transformations of organizations and the increasingly diverse workforce that constitutes them, it is evident that employees can no longer be considered as a homogeneous public to which communication is addressed in a generalized way. Even though it has not yet been fully explored, this issue of the segmentation of internal publics/stakeholders nevertheless appears to be an important challenge for internal communication professionals. Indeed, this segmentation is closely linked to the development of a thorough understanding of the different groups of employees, including an understanding of their specific communication needs, as well as their preferences regarding the channels and contents of internal communication, in order to tailor communication to the needs of these different groups (Welch, 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007).

3. Future Challenges for Internal Communication

The social and economic transformations faced by organizations, the evolution of the workforce, and the changing communication environment are creating new challenges for internal communication practices. As we have just observed, several authors have highlighted the need for internal communication professionals to develop a deeper understanding of internal organizational publics, including their communication needs and preferences. Welch has also suggested that internal communication professionals should develop "specialist knowledge and skills to meet the needs of diverse internal audiences" (Welch, 2015, p. 392).

In addition to these challenges, several studies have been carried out in recent years to analyze the current practices of internal communication professionals and the way in which they view their profession in the future. In 2009, the European Communication Monitor included a focus on the main trends in internal communication. In this time of economic crisis, three main priorities were emerging for internal communication: demonstrating the link to corporate strategies, supporting organizational change and restructuring, and dealing with information overload (Zerfass et al., 2009). Among other important future issues in internal communication, many communication professionals stressed "the need to train managers to act as communicators" as well as "spreading authentic content instead of polished messages" (Moreno et al., 2010, p. 102).

In a survey conducted in 2012, Tkalac Verčič and colleagues highlighted the main challenges for internal communicators: new internal digital (social) media, closely followed by change communication, issues of employee engagement and motivation, and trust and credibility in the leadership (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012).

More recently, on the occasion of its 30th anniversary, the French Association of Internal Communication (AFCI) conducted a major survey on the profession of internal communicator. This comprehensive survey consisted of a quantitative survey conducted with the consulting firm Occurrence among 367 professionals working in internal communication and a qualitative part, through a psychosocial study that retraces the career of ten internal communicators and two workshops to reflect on the future of internal communication. The results showed that internal communicators today are torn between the logic of content production and their desire to position themselves as strategic actors who develop relations with the various stakeholders in the company and contribute to the creation of a common sense within the organization. In addition to supporting the transformations of companies, two major dimensions appear to be both challenges and opportunities for the future practice of internal communication: digital communication and managerial communication. Although most of the internal communicators surveyed stress the importance of "placing managers at the heart of internal communication", in practice, few of them reported that they currently supported managers in their proximity communication (AFCI, 2019).

These results are in line with those highlighted in a previous survey we conducted in 2019 in collaboration with the consultancy firm Moodfactory, among a sample of 64 Belgian internal communicators. They also underline the logic of content production, management of communication channels and one-way flow in which internal communication professionals find themselves. Asked about the main challenges of internal communication, they identified the support for organizational change, the development of new digital tools, promoting relationships between employees, and supporting managers in their communication role. Although this last point appears to be a major issue for the future, only one professional out of three indicated that they were involved in communication support for managers. Finally, the study examined the main obstacles faced by internal communication professionals, which include the excessive amount of communication within the organization, the difficulty of reaching employees, the fact that managers are not strong enough communicators, the change fatigue among employees and the weakness of IT solutions (Moodfactory & UCLouvain, 2019).

4. The Current Study

This literature review has highlighted several important challenges for the evolution of internal communication practices, including the support for organizational change and digital transformation. Another major issue is the management of relations with the different internal publics that constitute the organization.

While this is an increasingly crucial issue for professionals, the question of segmenting internal publics has been little explored, and few guidelines exist as to the most effective and appropriate way to segment internal publics in different contexts. During the Covid-19 crisis, we conducted a large survey to analyze the experience of

internal communication among employees working in Belgian organizations. The analysis of the survey results led us to reflect on this question of the segmentation of internal publics in a context of unprecedent crisis. Thus, in the rest of this article, we propose to consider the following questions:

- Have the variables traditionally used to segment internal communication publics proved useful in the context of the Covid-19 crisis?
- What other variables have contributed to the emergence of a segmentation of internal audiences during the Covid-19 crisis period?
- To what extent has this new segmentation made it possible to discriminate the results between internal publics in terms of their communication needs?
- What implications can these results have for the evolution of the practices of internal communication professionals?
- Does the Covid-19 crisis call into question the challenges recently identified in the scientific literature?

Before addressing these questions in the results and discussion sections, we detail our data collection and analytical methods in the following section.

5. Measurement of Employees' Experience of Internal Communication during the COVID-19 Crisis

5.1. Research Design and Demographics

The survey we conducted during the Covid-19 crisis is part of a larger research project we have been working on since 2019 in collaboration with a Belgian consultancy company specializing in internal communication, Moodfactory. As part of this research project, we explore the measurement of internal communication. In doing so, we conduct annually a quantitative and qualitative survey to measure the internal communication experience of employees working in Belgium in order to establish the main trends in internal communication in this country. During the first lockdown period (March-May 2020) in Belgium due to the Covid-19 crisis, we launched a survey to measure the internal communication experience of employees working in Belgian organizations. The questionnaire consisted of 40 questions and its development was based on both field expertise of Moodfactory and inputs from the scientific literature on the measurement of communication. The first section was designed to measure respondents' overall satisfaction with internal communication during the crisis. The questionnaire explored then several dimensions related to communication satisfaction, such as access to information, receiving information in time, clarity of information, communication in a team situation, communication channels, format of messages, persons in charge of the communication, and managerial communication. The respondents were also invited to express their information needs and the way they would like to be informed in the future. Several questions examined how the crisis had affected the working situation of employees and its consequences on their financial situation, their contractual link with the

company. Another part of the questionnaire asked the respondents about their relationship with their organization (e.g., feeling that the organization takes care of its employees, concerns about the future of their organization, and concerns as to their own professional future). A specific section was designed to analyze the experience of employees obliged to telework in more detail. Finally, a part of the questionnaire was dedicated to managers and aimed to analyze, among others, their level of information, the support they receive in their communication role, and their ability to organize the work of their team. The questionnaire also included a series of socio-demographic questions and questions about the characteristics of the organization.

A pre-test of the quantitative survey was conducted online from 23 to 27 March 2020 among 250 employees who were recruited via a panel. Based on the results of this pre-test, we then adapted the questionnaire. We added a section to analyze more specifically the experiences of employees forced to go to their workplace during the crisis (i.e., the exposure to contamination risks, the information on the health risks involved, and the application of safety instructions). We also refined the section on teleworkers and added questions about management trust, and communication within a remote team.

The quantitative survey was then administered online via social networks between 28 March and 15 April 2020. Unlike the pre-test, which was conducted using a panel of respondents, we chose to administer the survey via social networks in order to obtain a greater diversity of respondents. This choice proved to be positive, as we saw an effect on the quality of the responses.

The profile and demographic characteristics of sample of respondents are presented in the Table 1.

Table 1. Profile and demographic characteristics of the respondents (n=515)

Variables	Characteristics	N	%
Professional status	Day laborer	5	1
	Employee	207	40
	Civil servant	69	13
	Middle manager	109	21
	Upper manager	51	10
	Teaching staff	36	7
	Liberal professional	8	2
	Other	30	6
Age	20–30 years old	82	16%
	31–40 years old	161	31%
	41–55 years old	231	45%
	Over 55 years old	40	8%
Management function	Yes	195	38%
	No	320	62%
Number of employees in the organization	Between 3 and 9 employees	26	5%
	Between 10 and 20 employees	33	6%
	Between 20 and 50 employees	80	16%
	Between 50 and 250 employees	77	15%
	Between 250 and 500 employees	50	10%

	More than 500 employees	249	48%
Sector of the organization	Public sector	175	34%
	Private sector	250	49%
	Non-market sector	90	17%
Type of industry	Healthcare and social services	80	16%
	Education	66	13%
	Utilities	61	12%
	Consulting	34	7%
	Financial institutions and insurance	36	7%
	ICT/computing	31	6%
	Industry	26	5%
	Non-profit organizations	26	5%
	Information and communication, media	22	4%
	General service delivery	19	4%
	Wholesale and retail trade	16	3%
	Business services	17	3%
	Transport, storage, communication	10	2%
	Building, construction	10	2%
	Others	61	11%

The sample included 515 employees working in organizations based in Belgium. Regarding the professional status of the respondents, 40% of them are employees, 21% middle managers, 13% civil servants and 10% upper managers. However, the category of day laborers is not sufficiently represented. Some 38% have a management function. In terms of age, the vast majority of the respondents were in the 41-55 bracket (45%), followed by the 31-40 years bracket (31%). Most of the respondents (48%) are working in organizations with more than 500 employees. The respondents work in organizations active in the public (34%), private (49%) or non-profit sector (17%). The main sectors of activity of the organizations which the respondents are from are healthcare and social services (16%), education (13%), utilities (12%), consulting (7%), financial institutions and insurances (7%) and ICT/computing (6%).

Following the analysis of the quantitative survey, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with employees who had participated in the quantitative survey. These were conducted online, as video calls, at the beginning of the reopening period in Belgium (June–July 2020). The purpose of these interviews was to discuss the different results highlighted in the quantitative survey, as well as to deepen the understanding of certain aspects, such as the relationship between internal communication and trust in the employer, the "employee-organization relationship" (i.e., how the organization maintained the link with its employees, created sense during this period of crisis), and to make a comparison between internal communication during the crisis and "normal times". These interviews were transcribed using a transcription software (Trint) and then thematically analyzed using QDA Miner Lite software.

In the following section, we review the main findings highlighted by our survey. We then discuss the implications of these results for the evolution of communication professionals' practices.

5.2. Findings

In general, we observed a relatively high level of satisfaction with internal communication among employees during the first wave of the Covid-19 crisis (March–May 2020). This satisfaction was on average 7.4/10, which represents a relatively significant difference compared to the satisfaction with internal communication of 6/10 measured in our research before the beginning of the pandemic (January 2020). Among the factors that can explain this high level of satisfaction with internal communication, we note in particular: clear and regular communication; transparent communication, especially regarding the situation of the company; the use of effective communication channels; and relevant content adapted to the needs of employees. It seems that the employees appreciated a certain return to the basics of internal communication. In general, they acknowledged the efforts of internal communication professionals to maintain links between all the members of the organization, as well as the creativity they demonstrated. On the other hand, employees did not appreciate when the communication was addressed in an undifferentiated way to all employees, without taking into account their specific needs, as expressed by one respondent:

> Our CEO communicated to all employees in a very general way. So, he was addressing the managers and the employees at the same time. There were parts of the communication that did not concern me at all. […] I really have a problem with the fact that the CEO addresses his managers and employees in the same communication because, in the end, the communication is not targeted, and the tone is not appropriate to the people he is addressing […] It's like witnessing things you shouldn't.

Besides these overall trends, the data collected led to the emergence of different employees' profiles with varying degrees of satisfaction with internal communication and specific communication needs. Indeed, the measures imposed by the Belgian government on companies in the context of the Covid-19 crisis (e.g., the obligation to telework, the definition of functions deemed essential, the shutdown of certain sectors, etc.) affected the employees within the organizations differently. Within an organization, some employees were asked to telework, while some of their colleagues had to continue to go to the workplace because they were performing essential functions, while others were put on temporary unemployment. Internal communication departments were thus faced with internal publics with very different experiences and specific communication needs.

During the pandemic, the traditional segmentation variables proved ineffective in discriminating results between different employees. But it emerged that the level of satisfaction with internal communication differed mainly on the basis of how the crisis affected the employees' working situations (see Table 2), and these work situations led to a differentiated exposure to different types of risks (see Table 3).

Table 2. Satisfaction of internal communication in relation to the work situation

	Mean	Median	SD
Overall (n=515)	7,4	8	2,4
Going to the workplace (n=39)	6,5	7	2,6
Teleworking (n=340)	8	8	1,9
Hybrid workers (n=35)	7,7	8	1,8
Temporary unemployed (n=24)	5,3	6	3,3
People managers (n=195)	7,8	8	2,1

N=515 / Q9: On a scale of 0 to 10, how satisfied are you with the way your organization currently communicates internally? / Scale: 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (very satisfied).

Table 3. Perception of the risks in function of the working situation



N=515 / Q38c: I am worried about the future of my organization due to the Covid-19 crisis. / Q38d: I am worried about my professional future due to the Covid-19 crisis. / Scale: 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) (we chose to use a 4-point Likert scale to avoid the point of neutrality which is sometimes chosen by respondents to not give an opinion or to skip the question). Percentages: frequency based on scale point 3-4.

Through the results of our survey, we identified five main categories of employees during the Covid-19 crisis: (1) *workers forced to go to their workplace due to their sector of activity* (healthcare, grocery, etc.); (2) *teleworkers*; (3) *hybrid workers*; (4) *workers temporarily unemployed*; and (5) the specific case of *people managers*. In the following, we examine in more detail these different profiles of employees by analyzing for each of them their exposure to a series of risks (mental health, physical health, etc.) and their specific communication needs.

Workers forced to go to their workplace due to their sector of activity. Among these workers, we find, for example, employees on the frontline in the health sector, workers in essential services, and employees whose functions did not allow them to telework. Not surprisingly, these workers were particularly concerned about their health and safety in the workplace, with 68% feeling exposed to the risk of contamination by Covid-19. With a high level of stress and pressure in the workplace, they were also exposed to high risks to their mental health. These workers were, however, less worried than average about the future of their organization and their own professional life (see Table 3). Related to the perceived risks, these employees primarily needed information that enabled them to deal with the stress and anxiety generated by the situation, such as clear instructions on how to stay safe, specific procedures related to Covid-19, and the availability of protective equipment. They also appreciated receiving regular updates about the evolution of the situation within their organization and the organizational adjustments that resulted from this. These frontline workers also wanted to receive specific HR information about overtime, the postponement of holidays, and risk premiums. Given their significant investment on the ground, these workers did not have the time to look for the information they needed and expected a structured communication that was easy and quick to access, namely on dedicated channels (e.g., a specific corner on the intranet, newsletter, posters, etc.). Finally, these frontline workers expected that the risks they faced on a daily basis would be recognized and that they would be listened to in relation to the difficulties they encountered: for example, "lack of realism in relation to what we were experiencing in the fieldwork. Saying thank you is not enough." Another respondent notes:

> One thing we missed was the respect and also the recognition of the work we accomplished, because we have given so much. Really. We worked long hours, and we didn't count these hours. Our ability to adapt was put to the test. It would have been really good for everyone to recognize the work done. We needed it … and we didn't get it.

Teleworkers. Although these employees were less concerned about their physical health than their colleagues who went to their workplace, they were more exposed to high risks with regard to their mental health and work-life balance. With the closure of schools during the first lockdown and then the organization of education in hybrid mode, some employees found it difficult to reconcile teleworking with looking after their children:

> The communications did not take into account at all the reality of the majority of employees. There is a lot of work and it is sometimes a challenge to meet your own goals because at the same time there is also a domestic/familial/educational role to fill.

By not going to their workplace, other employees experienced a significant reduction in social contact and felt isolated. This statement sums up the reality of the teleworkers:

> There is a series of collateral impacts with teleworking, namely that you no longer see anyone, and there is a great loss of information, particularly with regard to the informal aspects. Usually, we are arranged flexibly in the building, we move around, and it's a great way to get a lot of information, make connections, and find people to discuss things that can be sorted out quickly. Today, agendas are very busy and it's difficult to get the right people around the table. And that adds to the difficulty.

The questions of workload and the right to disconnect were also sources of difficulty for these workers. By being able to continue working from home, teleworkers were less worried than average about the future of their organization and their own professional future (see Table 3). In terms of communication, the teleworkers' main needs were for information about the reorganization of work remotely, including clear explanations about the distribution of tasks within the team, activities considered as priorities, possible changes in procedures, etc. In addition to this operational information, these workers were also looking for more strategic information about the possible impact of the crisis on the evolution of the organization's projects and the redefinition of the objectives to be achieved during the crisis. From the HR perspective, the information needs of the teleworkers were related to adaptation and flexibility in relation to working hours, leave policies, and a possible intervention of the employer in the costs related to telework (internet connection, electricity, purchase of equipment, etc.). Regarding communication channels, online meetings and collaborative tools were very popular with remote workers. These tools helped to maintain the social link between colleagues (e.g., stand–up meeting every morning, online coffee breaks, etc.) and offered employees the opportunity to discuss topics outside of work (tips for teleworking, a special corner to keep colleagues in touch, contests, etc.):

> We often have a team discussion with colleagues, just as many meetings (the show goes on), in the morning and evening a team greeting with colleagues, a weekly team discussion about recent decisions ... just as much info as on the workfloor itself.

Hybrid workers. This category includes employees who combine work from home with time in the office. It concerned a portion of the workers during the period when the Covid-19 situation allowed a partial return to the workplace. This hybrid mode was also the reality for a number of teachers who had to combine presential and remote teaching for many months. Even though regulated by strict safety measures, this return to the workplace was accompanied by stress and concerns about physical health. These workers were also exposed to high risks to their mental health and faced difficulties in relation to their personal organization (combination of their work with home schooling of their children). In terms of communication, these hybrid workers

expected clear information on the measures put in place to guarantee their safety in the office and the new organization of the workspace (dedicated place on the work floor, restricted areas, disinfection of desks, etc.). This hybrid situation also raised many questions from an operational point of view. Remote work has created new working dynamics within teams, and this hybrid situation makes teamwork even more complex. Clarity on the policies around home versus office work was needed to avoid creating inequalities among employees.

Workers temporarily unemployed. These employees were particularly worried about their financial situation, the future of their company and consequently their own professional future (see Table 3). Their situation was a source of stress and anxiety. Some felt a sense of inequality compared to their colleagues who had the opportunity to telework:

> Due to the fears of the laborers, it was decided to quickly put them on temporary unemployment ... this decision was taken in a hurry. In addition, it caused a gap with the office workers because they continued to work.

Not surprisingly, these workers expected their organizations to communicate as transparently as possible about the impact of the crisis on their company's future operations, its financial health, possible job losses, and recovery scenarios. They also primarily needed HR information on the procedures related to temporary unemployment and the financial consequences of unemployment on their wages. Being far away from their organization, these employees appreciated when specific tools were put in place to facilitate their access to information, to inform them regularly about the evolution of the situation, and to maintain the dialogue and link with their colleagues:

> I have been very well informed by my manager, and we receive emails about the company's direction regularly. The communication department has created a web platform where we can find all the information we need.

People managers. Besides the profiles identified above, there is also the special case of people managers. From organizing the work of their teams to maintaining links between employees, people managers have played a crucial role since the beginning of the crisis. In this unprecedented situation, people managers have been faced with a number of challenges, including having to supervise a remote team or a mixed team, with some collaborators working from home and others in the field:

> We try to do our upmost to inform staff members as well as possible and regularly about the decisions and actions taken. However, with half now teleworking, a quarter being off duty, and the remaining quarter in the field, contact is now only virtual and by email or message. Overall, the information flow is going well, but there is room for improvement.

Dealing with the daily demands and difficulties of their team members, some felt very isolated during the crisis. Many of them also saw their workloads increase considerably during the crisis. Although they were less worried about the future of their organization and their own professional future (see Table 3), managers were exposed to high risks with regard to their mental health and personal organization. For

example, they had to completely adapt their management and communication with their teams. More than ever, managers needed support from the organization in their communication role. Yet, in our survey, one manager out of five did not feel sufficiently supported by their organization in this role. To deal with their team's demands, managers expected their organization to be informed on many subjects. From a strategic point of view, they needed to know the impact of the crisis on the company (financial, customer level, possible job losses, etc.). In order to be able to organize the work of their team, managers also needed to receive clear guidelines from senior management, such as the continuity of their department's activities, the follow-up on strategic projects, and the objectives to be achieved. They also expected information on HR aspects, such as holidays of team members, information on temporary unemployment, etc. Finally, the managers also needed support to manage the psycho-social risks of their employees (anxiety, mental load, etc.).

We end this analysis of the results with two statements from our interviews which summarize the important role of internal communication during the crisis:

> In relation to the anxiety-inducing situation reported in the media, we all needed to be reassured about our working environment and the company in which we worked. We needed to be reassured about our personal reality and our daily lives, and to know how it would affect us directly.

> I have the feeling that internal communication has mainly served to provide a link between the different departments and to share the realities of the different departments beyond the purely structural and pragmatic information that we should have had in the context of crisis management.

Table 4 below summarizes the different employees' profiles that were identified, based on how the crisis affected the way workers carry out their work and their exposure to different types of risks.

Table 4. Profiles of employees based on how the crisis affected their working situations and their exposure to different risks

	Physical health at risk	Mental health at risk	Worried about the company's future	Worried about their professional future	Worried about their economic situation	Difficulty with personal organization	Communication needs
Workers forced to go to the workplace	High	High	Low	Low	Low	Moderate	- Clear safety instructions, specific procedures, supply of protective equipment. - Regular updates on the evolution of the situation within the organization and adjustments. - HR information about overtime and hours of recovery, postponement of holidays, risk premium. - Easy and quick access to information on dedicated channels (intranet, newsletter, etc.).
Teleworkers	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Low	High/Moderate	- Information about the reorganization of work remotely. - Information about the impact of the crisis on strategic projects and the objectives to be achieved during the crisis. - HR information on the possibilities of flexibility, leave policy, intervention in the costs related to telework. - Via email, online meetings and collaborative tools.
Hybrid workers	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Low	High	- Information about the safety measures in the office and the new organization of the workspaces. - Operational information to organize work within the team, and a clear policy on home versus office work.
Workers temporarily unemployed	Low	High	High	High	High	Low	- Transparent information on the impact of the crisis on the company's future, its financial health, possible job losses and recovery scenarios. - HR information on the procedures related to temporary unemployment and the financial consequences. - Via specific channels to facilitate access to information and maintain the link.
People managers	High/Moderate	High	Low/Moderate	Low	Low	High	- Information on the impact of the crisis on the company. - Guidelines from the senior management about the follow-up on strategic projects, the objectives to be achieved. - Need support from the organization in their role of communication.

Discussion and Conclusions

The research we conducted during the Covid-19 crisis has some interesting implications for communication professionals as well as researchers in the field of internal crisis communication and about the issue of segmentation of internal publics.

First, our survey results confirm the raising importance for internal communication professionals to consider the diversity of the organization's internal publics, as already emphasized in previous research (e.g., Suh & Lee, 2016; Yeomans & FitzPatrick, 2017). Especially in times of crisis, we have seen that employees cannot be considered as a homogeneous public to which communication is addressed in a generalized way. They expect communication to be tailored to their specific needs and these are directly related to how the crisis affects their situation and their differentiated perception of risks. In the context of the pandemic, the approaches traditionally used to segment internal publics, such as demographic variables (Men & Bowen, 2016; Suh & Lee, 2016) or based on the hierarchical level (Men & Bowen, 2016), did not prove relevant for identifying groups of employees with a distinctive level of satisfaction and specific communication needs. The segmentation based on the situations of interaction within the organization (Welch & Jackson, 2007) did not allow for the identification of specific employee profiles.

During the Covid-19 crisis, it appears that a new typology of internal publics emerged around a combination of specific variables: (1) the way in which the crisis influenced the working situation of employees (forced to go to the workplace, teleworking, temporary unemployment, etc.) and (2) the exposure to different types of risks and concerns that their work situations entailed. Among these risks, we listed those related to the employees' physical health, mental health, concerns about the future of their organization and their own professional future, worries about their financial situation and their personal organization (including the issue of work/life balance). These two types of variables we mobilized to segment internal publics during the crisis were not specifically identified in previous research.

Our findings refer also to the Wojtecki and Peters' (2000) proposition to develop internal communication in line with understanding of the employees' risk perceptions: "Situations in which concerns are high and trust is low call for as much attention to the methods of communicating as to the messages" (Wojtecki & Peters, 2000, p. 1). More specifically, the authors encourage low-tech approaches and focusing on two-way communication to reduce employees' perceptions of risk during times of change and uncertainty. At the heart of this two-way communication, they place in a key role the immediate manager, who is the most preferred source of information for employees and is also the best able to understand the day-to-day realities they faced. These last considerations refer to another key finding of our survey. Our segmentation of the internal publics has highlighted the special case of people managers and confirms the rising concern as regards managerial communication already identified in previous surveys (AFCI, 2019; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012). Similar to other non-supervisory employees, people managers have been affected in their personal work

situations and exposed to different types of risks during this crisis. At the same time, they have an important communication role with their teams. Their presence and their ability to listen have been essential for the workers forced to go to their workplace, and they have played a crucial role for the teleworkers in organizing remote working and in keeping remote employees connected. The Covid-19 crisis has thus highlighted the importance of managerial communication and the growing need for managers to develop specific skills to fulfil their communication role and to receive appropriate support from the organization. More than ever, the role of communication professionals in supporting managers needs to be questioned. Which role the internal communication departments must play to provide communication training for managers? How should communication professionals conceive this support for managers?

More broadly, the results of our survey prompt us to question the main challenges of internal communication in the future. The recent surveys conducted among communication professionals (AFCI, 2019; Moodfactory & UCLouvain, 2019) pointed out the support for organizational changes, the development of digital tools, establishing links between employees, and supporting managers in their communication role as main challenges. The imposition of teleworking in many companies during the Covid-19 crisis have undoubtedly accelerated the digital transformation of communication, especially with the large-scale deployment of collaborative tools and online meetings. The lasting changes that this crisis will engender in work practices, and, in some cases, the restructuring it will bring about in certain organizations, will place communication professionals in an important role of supporting change in the coming years. In this regard, our typology of internal publics, based on how the crisis affects the reality of work and the perception of a series of risks, appears interesting to help professionals to develop communication strategies in relation to different types of projects that involve risks. It invites them to reflect in terms of risks and to consider the specific needs of the different internal publics to adapt the content of the messages, their formats, and the best communication channels to these needs.

Regarding the limitations of this research, we can underline that the sample of our survey only concerned employees from organizations based in Belgium and in a context of unprecedented crisis. Another is that our survey was conducted at the beginning of the pandemic, a time of great uncertainty and the gradual implementation of measures to fight Covid-19. It would be interesting to analyze how the segmentation of internal publics, the perception of risks and communication needs have evolved over the course of the crisis, notably through the following surveys we have conducted. Future research could also refine the different types of risks that employees would face in different types of crisis (e.g., restructuring, organizational change, etc.). Finally, it would be interesting to extend this research by conducting a survey among internal communication professionals to question how they view the issue of segmentation of internal publics and the evolution of their practices following the Covid-19 crisis.

Funding and Acknowledgements

This research project is carried out with the financial support of Innoviris. A key role of Innoviris is to finance applied research projects carried out in collaboration with a partner company located in the Brussels-Capital Region.

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