Encyclopedia of Human Resources Information Systems: Challenges in e–HRM

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A–H
E–Communication in the Information Society and the Impact of New Technologies on Employee Communication

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INTRODUCTION

In Castells’ (2001) definition of the information society, the term information refers to a specific form of social organization in which the generation, processing, and transmission of information become the basic source of productivity and power, due to the new technological conditions of a particular period of time. In this information-based society, people are amongst the most valuable and scarce assets of an organization (Murgolo-Poore, Pitt, & Ewing, 2002). It is recognized that members of an organization are of capital importance to its success, and employees are viewed as a key strategic group in obtaining organizational competitiveness (Grunig, 1992; Murgolo-Poore & Pitt, 2001).

Employee communication plays an important role in improving organizational efficacy, performance, and competitiveness (Clampitt & Downs, 1993; Morley, Shockley-Zalabak, & Cesaria, 2002). It plays a role in the coordination of tasks, the circulation of information, and in helping employees to identify with organizational objectives and values (Hargie & Tourish, 2004). It even has potential benefits for external customer satisfaction (Piercy & Morgan, 1991; Fisk, Brown, & Bitner, 1993). This confirms the vital role that employee communication plays in organizational success (Murgolo-Poore & Pitt, 2001).

Communication with and between employees is a central aspect of organizational life, and it has become even more important as organizations have entered the age of the knowledge economy (Murgolo-Poore et al., 2002). The information society, or knowledge-based era, brings challenges and opportunities to the employee communication process. New technologies are creating new channels of communication within organizations, and they are also modifying the old means of communication. Just as importantly, they are changing the way that organizational communication is now understood.

This article presents the main impacts that new technologies (and, principally, the Internet) are having on employee communication, which can help us to understand the magnitude—and the implications—of the changes that have been produced in organizations by the evolution from traditional employee communication to e-communication.

BACKGROUND

Employee communication has been mainly studied within the field of organizational communication. The literature about organizational communication has been concerned with “the systematic manners by which communication practices can be used to help coordinate and control the activities of organizational members and relations with external constituencies” (Deetz, 2001). Organizational communication as a subject of research can be found in a number of academic disciplines, including organizational psychology, organizational sociology, business and management, industrial relations, applied anthropology, journalism, public relations, and speech communication (Grunig, 1992; Redding, 1985). It has been primarily centered in the structure (communication networks, superior-subordinate communication, formal organizational structure, etc.) and in the process (message flow process, efficiency of communication, power, motivation, etc.) of communication within organizations (Jablin, Putnam, Roberts, & Porter, 1987; Tompkins & Wanca-Thibault, 2001).

Organizational communication in the past was influenced by speech communication theories and was mainly from the transmission-orientated perspective, which is orientated towards the analysis of the efficiency of communication (Grunig, 1992; Redding, 1985; Tompkins & Wanca-Thibault, 2001). This perspective views communication as a product of the organizations
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in which it is situated and developed (Deetz, 2001; Tompkins, 1984). That is, communication is a result of a particular manner of organizing.

From this point of view, employee communication can be conceived as the transmission of information from the top down to the lower levels of the organization. This traditional manner of understanding employee communication has prevailed for decades. Employee communication programmes have given priority to a group of unidirectional techniques of communication from employers to employees, with the main objective of disseminating information, transmitting decisions, and controlling people. This notion has a clear informational character, because it is focused on informing employees of company news and activities that are happening in the organization. It is an asymmetrical system of communication (Grunig, 1992) in which the emphasis is on descendent information (entertaining, informing, and persuading employees), with little importance assigned to ascendant communication. It is usually implemented through unidirectional means of communication (such as internal newsletters or magazines, notice boards, memorandums, etc.), which are given more importance than interpersonal, face-to-face communication. This type of communication makes no effort to obtain employee participation, because it is concerned merely with transmitting information to them.

However, some authors (Grunig, 1992; Redding, 1972; Tompkins, 1984) suggest that there has been an evolution of the previous perspective. Redding (1972) proposes a reception-orientated perspective of organizational communication that is centered in what information the employees need and want and how they interpret the information that they receive. Grunig (1992) suggests the need for a symmetrical system of communication that functions throughout an organization and operates at the interpersonal and group levels as well as at the organizational level. In this perspective, employee and organizational communication may be understood as the exchange of information throughout all levels of an organization. In this conception, communication is not the result of organizational structure, but plays a critical role in the creation of it (Tompkins, 1984). Tompkins (1984) affirms that communication constitutes organizations, that is, that organizations can be considered to be systems of interacting individuals who are immersed in an active process of creating and re-creating the organization through communication. Thus, authors such as Taylor (1995) and Stohl (1995) define the organization as a system of communication that is expressed through the discourse that is produced by a set of authors. So, organizational communication no longer reflects reality, but creates and represents the process of organizing (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996; Tompkins & Wanca-Thibault, 2001).

The implementation of this manner of communication should be based on communication tools and activities that help the free flow and exchange of information within the organization. All members of the organization are implicated in communicating and exchanging information about what they are doing. The exchange of information becomes multidirectional (ascendant, descendent, and horizontal) through dialogue, which establishes a symmetrical system of communication. This perspective is more difficult to develop than the previous transmission-orientated approach, and it implies recognition that the basic method of communication is direct and personal contact amongst all members of an organization. The traditional unidirectional tools of communication are thus not very effective for this method of communication. In contrast, the new interactive channels of communication that have arrived with new technologies are useful tools to facilitate a multidirectional flow of information amongst all levels of an organization.

THE IMPACT OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES ON EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION

Traditional employee communication is, principally, unidirectional, one-to-many and top-down, and in very few cases does it stimulate dialogue and bidirectional communication. The main reason for this is that the traditional means of communication are not flexible, and they do not allow effective multidirectional communication amongst the members of an organization (Grunig, 1992; Murgolo-Poore & Pitt, 2001). This does not help people in organizations to obtain and diffuse information that they want and need.

However, the increasing development of new technologies (the Internet, in particular) has had an important impact on every aspect of organizational life (O’Kane, Hargie, & Tourish, 2004) and has revolutionized the way people and organizations communicate (Springston, 2001). The appropriate use of new technologies will be an important challenge for organizations in the near future.
The Internet has become, in a very short time, an indispensable communication tool for organizations. Stuart and Jones (2004) point out that the Internet can fulfill a broad range of functions, such as serving as a persuasive advertising medium, as a means to educate or inform, as a way to communicate and interact, as a means of building and maintaining relationships, or simply as a source of entertainment. Previous work (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003) has shown the importance of the Internet as a communication tool that offers organizations growing flexibility, personalization, and time savings with regard to the needs and interests of several publics. In communication programmes, the Internet is taking on increasing relevance, and it offers practitioners new opportunities to engage in dialogue with different publics.

By applying Internet technology, organizations have developed several tools (intranets, e-mails, blogs, chats, forums, etc.) for internal communication activities. These new digital tools of communication are transforming the way that people obtain information, communicate, and engage in relationships within organizations (Springston, 2001). These new technologies are not only creating new means of communication, but they are also modifying the way that the old channels are used.

These new technological tools of communication are creating blurred boundaries between senders and receivers, between information and communication, and between new and old media, and, so, it is necessary to review some of the old paradigms that guided communication in the industrial era (Holtz, 2002; Orihuela, 2003; Phillips, 2001). Some of them are specifically related to employee communication, as are the following (Table 1).

- **From passive receivers to active senders:** Holtz (2002) argues that two fundamental models of communication have been altered by communicating and accessing information through the new technologies: who provides the information, and how do audiences get the information that they need. The Internet has transformed communication from a sender-based model to a receiver-based model (Holtz, 2002). In the industrial era, communication was producer-driven, with receivers acting merely as passive recipients of the information (Holtz, 2002). In the information society, the new media have changed receivers into active participants in the communication process, either by actively seeking information (people want to find out what they need when they need it) or by actively distributing information as senders (Orihuela, 2003; Phillips, 2001; Springston, 2001). This point is quite relevant for employee communication, because employees are no longer passive receptors of information. They have become active subjects of the communication process: as senders of information to all of the different levels of the organization, because the

| Table 1. Employee communication before and after Internet technology |
|---|---|---|
| **Employee Communication** | Before Internet technology | After Internet technology |
| Employees as passive receivers of information | Employees as active senders of information |
| One-way/one-to-many communication | Two-way/many-to-many communication |
| Information distribution/scarcity of information | Knowledge-sharing/information overload |
| **Organizational Structures** | Hierarchical | Flattened |
| | Controlled | Open |
Internet provides a mechanism to facilitate communication interchange and enable discussion, or as active seekers of information, because the Internet offers them many possibilities to look for and to retrieve information (Springston, 2001).

• **From one-way communication to interactive communication:** In traditional communication, an organization creates messages and disseminates them to all of its publics, with the objective to inform them about organizational activities (Holtz, 2002). This kind of communication can be characterized as non-interactive, unidirectional (one-way), asymmetrical and orientated toward the dissemination of information (one-to-many). But Murgolo-Poore and Pitt (2001) affirm that if an organization wants to have long-term success, it should develop clear, open, and symmetrical communication with its employees. With the new technologies, interactive communication is becoming easier. Interactivity is one of the main characteristics of the Internet and has been the subject of a considerable number of studies in the communications field (Ha & James, 1998; Downes & McMillan, 2000; Rafaeli, 1988). Through the new digital tools, all users can be senders and receivers, so communication becomes dialogic (two-way), symmetrical, and multidirectional (many-to-many). In this way, the new technologies introduce any-to-any communication within the company (O’Kane et al., 2004), which helps the flow of information in all directions (ascendant, descendant, and horizontal). Moreover, these new tools facilitate the move from a focal relationship (top managers to employees) to a multilateral relationship (every member of the organization), because they stimulate interaction amongst all members of the organization (December, 1996; Springer, 2001).

• **From information distribution to knowledge-sharing:** In traditional communication, the flow of information was from the few people who had the information to the many people who did not have it. Today, the Internet allows people and organizations to make available data, information, and knowledge. The amount of information that is now available is enormous. The situation has changed from a scarcity of information to an abundance of it and, even to information overload (Holtz, 2002; Orihuela, 2003; Phillips, 2001). Within organizations, the new technologies allow mountains of information to be made available, but this information needs to be controlled to ensure that it provides accurate and timely information to the organization and its employees (O’Kane et al., 2004; Springer, 2001). If it is well managed, this information helps employees to do their work more efficiently and encourages people within the organization to share their knowledge with others. Information and knowledge can even be shared in real time (O’Kane et al., 2004; Orihuela, 2003). Moreover, the Internet allows people to engage in the new activity of pulling the information they want based on what they need and when they need it (Holtz, 2002; Phillips, 2001). The Internet is a pull form of communication, and communicators can help this pull process. E-communication tools encourage employees to pull information towards themselves rather than having employers push it at them (O’Kane et al., 2004).

The new technologies, however, do not only have an influence on the channels of communication, but they also have an influence on organizational structures and processes (O’Kane et al., 2004). If communication influences organizational structures and processes (Deetz, 2001; Tompkins, 1984), then the changes that affect communication will have a decisive effect on the process and structure of the organization itself. The following are two of the main changes in organizations.

• **From hierarchical to flattened structures:** In traditional organizations, hierarchical structures are needed to ensure and control the flow of information about decisions from top managers to employees and daily information from employees to top managers. In these organizations, therefore, a wide range of organizational levels are established between employees and top managers. With the help of the new technologies, organizations no longer need to have a large number of middle managers to control and often censor the information (Samuels, 1997). People expect to receive information quickly and directly from the source to do their jobs effectively. Thus, the organizational structure is flattened, and the any-to-any flow of information can be introduced (O’Kane et al., 2004). With flatter structures, people from different departments and with different func-
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Employees can contact any individual whom they feel has the specialized knowledge that will help them to do their jobs (Samuels, 1997). Organizations can place more emphasis on horizontal processes than on vertical relationships, which will encourage employees to network throughout the company, beyond their traditional boundaries.

- From controlled structures to open structures:
  In traditional organizations, all of the key information is pulled to the top, and managers make decisions that drive resources, responsibilities, and control down to the employees. In opposition to this, the new technologies allow communication to flow freely throughout an organization, which cuts through hierarchical and bureaucratic obstacles (Samuels, 1997). The traditional notions of power and control have been altered. One of the principal roles of managers has been that of gatekeeper (O’Kane et al., 2004). Even communicators have worked as communication gatekeepers to facilitate the delivery of organizational messages (Springston, 2001). With the new technologies, organizational structures are moving from command and control structures to informed and connected networks of people (Holtz, 2002; Phillips, 2001). The sharing of knowledge and exchange of information allows all employees to have access to corporate knowledge and facilitates the distribution of responsibilities and decisions amongst all of the organizational levels. In doing so, more and more of the decisions become the responsibility of employees. Moreover, if greater participation and involvement is desired, then it is necessary to build an environment of trust (Phillips, 2001; Samuels, 1997). Therefore, openness, transparency, and trust are becoming more important values than information control and hierarchy within organizations.

We can clearly observe, then, how the new technologies, and principally the Internet, can determine not only the communication strategies and channels within an organization, but also influence the organizational structure and processes.

FUTURE TRENDS

It is very difficult to predict the effects of the Internet on society and on organizations. In the next few years, more and more sophisticated technology will emerge very quickly. For instance, wireless technology is even now providing new and more flexible options for communication within organizations.

However, organizations are not currently using all of the advantages that Internet technology offers as an interactive, multidirectional, and symmetrical means of communication (Springston, 2001). Holtz (2002) suggests that new technology is used to duplicate the functions of existing technology. Many organizations have merely created electronic versions of print-based materials. Negroponte (1995) indicates that many developers of new media have focused on the display aspects of communication, rather than on the content and on audience needs. New technologies are used in employee communication, simply as new ways of creating and presenting old media (e-newsletters, e-brochures, e-magazines, etc.). For example, Murgolo-Poore and Pitt (2001) suggest that communicators are using intranets as tools for publishing and broadcasting. With the new digital tools, employee communication must go beyond the traditional forms of communication, and communicators must develop innovative applications of the new technologies to facilitate it.

Even when the new technologies are applied to the fullest of their potential, however, the importance of the human element and of face-to-face interaction cannot be underestimated (McDermott, 1999). The Internet has not changed people’s need to interact face-to-face with other people or with organizations (Holtz, 2002). Murgolo-Poore and Pitt (2001) say that “touch and tech must work together to provide the balance which will enable communicators to maximize all interactions and exchanges.” This will be the future challenge for employee communicators.

CONCLUSION

New technologies have affected all organizations and will influence even more in the future. They have had an impact upon many aspects of organizational structures and processes, and they have also affected the way in which organizations and employees communicate with each other. However, the implementation of these new
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technologies must not be viewed as a panacea that can solve all of the problems of employee communication. Organizations need to recognize both the benefits and the possible dangers that these new media bring. O’Kane et al. (2004) affirm that the key consideration is not which new technology to implement, but rather how to use it and how to combine it with other channels of communication. To maximize the impact of the new media as communication tools, organizations must develop all of the advantages of the new media and integrate them with the existing traditional media into their employee communication strategies.

REFERENCES


E-Communication in the Information Society


**KEY TERMS**

**Communication Programme:** A group of objectives, strategies, tactics, and actions of communication that are planned and implemented by an organization to disseminate information and/or to engage in dialogue with its publics to help achieve organizational goals.

**E-Communication:** Actions and techniques of communication that are characterized by the utilization of new technologies and, in particular, the Internet tools of communication (World Wide Web, electronic mail, Weblogs, chats, forums, wikies, etc.).

**Employee Communication:** The exchange of information amongst organizational members throughout all levels of an organization.

**Information Society:** A specific form of social organization in which the generation, processing, and transmission of information becomes the basic source of productivity and power, due to the new technological conditions of a particular period of time.

**Interactive Communication:** Type of communication in which the subjects of the process of communication (senders and receivers) are interchangeable during the communication process. It is generally assumed that interactivity occurs in interpersonal, “face-to-face” communication, but it can also occur in mediated communication (for example, by sending and receiving messages). Interactivity is stimulated by the use of new technologies.

**Organizational Communication:** The communication practices that can be used to help coordinate and control the activities of organization members and relations with external publics.

**Publics:** Groups of people or organizations that have a common interest with regard to an organization and which can affect the achievement of its goals and objectives (customers, providers, employees, distributors, communities, activist groups, etc.). Employees are considered to be one of an organization’s most important publics.
Symmetrical Communication: The principles and practices of communication that are developed by an organization, in which the organization and its publics engage in a “peer-to-peer” dialogue and in a fluent relationship to achieve their goals and objectives through win-win strategies and mutual understanding.