

The function of internal communication during the COVID-19 health crisis: Transformation or transubstantiation?*

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Abstract

To find out whether the role of internal communication was transformed or transubstantiated as a result of the situation caused by the COVID-19 health crisis, a series of structured interviews with communication managers were held from the most severe period of lockdown (April 2020) until the end of the fifth wave (June 2021), with the aim of examining whether the function of internal communication in organizations had been affected by this health crisis and if so, to what extent. Internal communication as a managerial function underwent adaptation and adjustments, for which organizations had no ad hoc existing manuals or guidelines to follow *in stricto sensu*, because the nearest precedent comparable to the current situation occurred over a century ago and within a completely

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different economic context. The pandemic has led to a marked digitization of internal communication channels, the dissemination of contents focused on health, well-being and safety of employees, alignment with the team, transparency, sustainability and diversity, with the express aim of providing emotional support and forging an image of security. It has also become an accelerating factor from a strategic perspective. Furthermore, new gaps have emerged, such as the need for employee self-management, along with managerial challenges posed by ambiguity, privacy, data accuracy and security and work-life balance in the teleworking context. All these concerns imply and require the direct involvement of internal communication to tackle them and find solutions. Yet what has changed is the various ways the internal communication function displays itself, but not the substance of the discipline. Thus, continuity in the strategic management of this function is crucial for its further development as an essential contribution for facing current and upcoming challenges.

Keywords: corporate communication; internal communication; COVID-19; health crisis; pandemic; public relations

Resum. *La funció de la comunicació interna durant la crisi sanitària de la COVID-19: ¿transformació o transsubstanciació?*

Per esbrinar si el paper de la comunicació interna ha patit una transformació o una transsubstanciació com a conseqüència de la situació provocada per la crisi sanitària de la COVID-19, s'han realitzat una sèrie d'entrevistes estructurades amb els responsables de comunicació des del període més sever del confinament (abril de 2020) fins al final de la cinquena onada (juny de 2021), amb l'objectiu d'examinar si la funció de comunicació interna a les organitzacions es va veure afectada per aquesta crisi sanitària i, si és així, fins a quin punt. La comunicació interna com a funció directiva ha experimentat adaptacions i ajustos davant unes situacions per a les quals les organitzacions no tenien manuals o directrius *ad hoc* existents a seguir *stricto sensu*, perquè el precedent més proper comparable a la situació actual es va produir fa més d'un segle i en un context econòmic completament diferent. La pandèmia ha comportat una marcada digitalització dels canals de comunicació interna, la difusió de continguts centrats en la salut, el benestar i la seguretat dels empleats, l'alineació amb l'equip, la transparència, la sostenibilitat i la diversitat, amb l'objectiu exprés de donar suport emocional i forjar una imatge de seguretat. També s'ha convertit en un factor accelerador des d'una perspectiva estratègica. A més, han sorgit noves llacunes, com la necessitat d'autogestió dels empleats, juntament amb els reptes de gestió plantejats per l'ambigüitat, la privadesa, la precisió i seguretat de les dades i l'equilibri entre la vida laboral i la vida personal en el context del teletreball. Totes aquestes inquietuds requereixen la implicació directa de la comunicació interna per abordar-les i trobar-hi solucions. Tanmateix, el que ha canviat són les diferents maneres en què es mostra la funció de comunicació interna, però no la substància de la disciplina. Així doncs, la continuïtat en la gestió estratègica d'aquesta funció és fonamental per al seu desenvolupament posterior com a contribució essencial per afrontar els reptes actuals i futurs.

Paraules clau: comunicació corporativa; comunicació interna; COVID-19; crisi sanitària; pandèmia; relacions públiques

Resumen. *La función de la comunicación interna durante la crisis sanitaria del COVID-19: ¿transformación o transsubstanciación?*

Para saber si el papel de la comunicación interna ha sufrido una transformación o una transsubstanciación a raíz de la situación provocada por la crisis sanitaria del COVID-19,

se han realizado una serie de entrevistas estructuradas a responsables de comunicación desde el periodo más severo del confinamiento (abril de 2020) hasta el final de la quinta ola (junio de 2021), con el objetivo de examinar si la función de comunicación interna en las organizaciones se vio afectada por esta crisis sanitaria y, de ser así, en qué medida. La comunicación interna como función gerencial ha experimentado adaptaciones y ajustes ante unas situaciones para las cuales las organizaciones no contaban con manuales o directrices *ad hoc* existentes a seguir en sentido estricto, pues el antecedente más cercano equiparable a la situación actual ocurrió hace más de un siglo y en un contexto económico completamente distinto. La pandemia ha supuesto una marcada digitalización de los canales de comunicación interna, la difusión de contenidos centrados en la salud, el bienestar y la seguridad de los empleados, la alineación con el equipo, la transparencia, la sostenibilidad y la diversidad, con el objetivo expreso de brindar apoyo emocional y forjar una imagen de seguridad. También se ha convertido en un factor acelerador desde una perspectiva estratégica. Además, han surgido nuevas brechas, como la necesidad de autogestión de los empleados, junto con los desafíos gerenciales que plantean la ambigüedad, la privacidad, la precisión y seguridad de los datos y el equilibrio entre la vida laboral y la vida personal en el contexto del teletrabajo. Todas estas inquietudes requieren la implicación directa de la comunicación interna para abordarlas y encontrar soluciones. Sin embargo, lo que ha cambiado son las diversas formas en que se muestra la función de comunicación interna, pero no la sustancia de la disciplina. Por ello, la continuidad en la gestión estratégica de esta función es crucial para su posterior desarrollo como contribución fundamental para afrontar los retos actuales y futuros.

Palabras clave: comunicación corporativa; comunicación interna; COVID-19; crisis sanitaria; pandemia; relaciones públicas

1. Introduction

With the COVID-19 crisis, the world has changed and, consequently, so have concepts, beliefs and processes, as well as many of the established ideas regarding internal communication (IC) (Ruck and Men, 2021; Verazzi, Padrós and Vallmajor, 2022). The pandemic may have meant accidental (not essential) transformations in IC, or substantial alterations in its essence, i.e. a transubstantiation (Aquino, 2001). Consistent with Aquinas's postulate, the accidental transformation of the function of IC would lead to resilience and adaptation by workers, while transubstantiation could cause confusion and helplessness, turning the discipline into a new function with new demands in terms of profiles and skills.

Taking IC as an independent and strategic function, the aim of this study is to explore whether the IC function has undergone accidental or substantial changes as a result of the health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. *The function of internal communication*

When a function is young and in full evolutionary phase, finding a unanimous purpose is never simple, and such is the case with internal communica-

tion (Cuenca and Verazzi, 2018; Tkalac, Verčič and Sriramesh, 2012). This confusion is consistent with the fact that even in companies of considerable size it is a function that does not have a large number of people dedicated exclusively to it, nor a large budget (ASCAI and FEIEA, 2018; Dialenga, 2021; Gallagher, 2022); furthermore it is scattered across communication, human resources and marketing; and it is even subordinated to the dominant coalition (Aced-Toledano and Miquel-Segarra, 2021; Aced, Arocas and Miquel, 2021; Cuenca and Verazzi, 2018; Dialenga, 2021; Gallagher, 2022; Tkalac et al., 2012). Yet all academics and practitioners agree that IC is a function focused on internal audiences that is one of the fastest growing specialisations of public relations as an essential element in the preservation of corporate culture and change management, and always aligned with the corporate objectives of the organisation (Berceruelo, 2020; Cuenca and Verazzi, 2018; Hume and Leonard, 2014; Meng and Berger, 2012; Mishra, Boynton and Mishra, 2014; Theaker, 2022; Tkalac et al., 2012; Yaxley and Ruck, 2015).

The original IC function was to promote and develop a fluent relationship between people, and to facilitate the circulation and exchange of information concerning the organisational mission (Frank and Brownell, 1989). Now, however, IC is becoming a highly professionalised two-way strategic praxis in organisations and in the field of consultancy services and specialised agencies (Aced-Toledano and Miquel-Segarra, 2021; Cowan, 2017; Cuenca and Verazzi, 2018, 2020; Dahlman and Heide, 2021; FitzPatrick and Valskov, 2014; Karanges et al., 2015; Men and Bowen, 2016; Men and Yue, 2017; Miquel-Segarra and Aced, 2018, 2019; Verčič, Čorić and Vokić, 2021; Zerfass and Viertmann, 2016). In brief, it has evolved into a fundamental activity to cement and maintain a psychological contract based on trust and employee engagement (Castro-Martínez and Díaz-Morilla, 2020; Qin and Men, 2022; Ruck, 2020; Ruck and Men, 2021; Santoso, Sulistyanyingtyas and Pratama, 2022; Yeomans and Carthew, 2014; Xifra, 2020; Zerfass et al., 2017, 2019, 2021). It helps achieve organisational differentiation, efficiency and innovation, and address reputational challenges (Berceruelo, 2020). What is more, it is a tool for building community, for creating and maintaining a desired and useful level of satisfaction and performance (Sinčić, Pološki and Tkalac, 2020; Tkalac and Spoljarič, 2020; Berceruelo, 2020), and for influencing and relating to these internal publics (Aced-Toledano and Miquel-Segarra, 2021; Cutlip, Center and Broom, 2006; Aced et al., 2021; Tkalac, Sinčić and Pološki, 2021; Theaker, 2022).

In sum, IC is a strategic function that segments internal audiences, determines objectives aligned with corporate objectives, is attentive to the concerns, key interests and expectations of employees, generates content, designs communication actions and makes decisions on channels, distributes the budget, and develops the evaluation process (Aced et al., 2021; Álvarez-Nobell and Lesta, 2011; Berceruelo, 2020; Cuenca and Verazzi, 2018, 2020; FitzPatrick and Valskov, 2014; Theaker, 2022).

2.2. The role of internal crisis communication

Organisations have usually focused on external communication (Heide and Simonsson, 2019), while communication efforts in a crisis scenario have also mainly concentrated on its external consequences (Strandberg and Vigsø, 2016). However, the contribution of IC can also be decisive in the face of a crisis situation, which constitutes a threat to the survival of the organisation, or at least to the development of its activities (Berceruelo, 2020; Coombs, 2015; Kim, 2018; Mazzei and Butera, 2021; Mazzei, Kim and Dell’Oro, 2012; Santoso et al., 2022).

When people are faced with changes in their known environment, they need clues to help them decipher what is happening, and to understand how it will affect them and how they can cope with these changes. In these situations, audiences actively seek information through different channels, according to their concerns and needs (Kim et al., 2019). The same is true within an organisation, so IC is a lever that helps prevent crises, minimises damage and conveys the most appropriate information (Mazzei et al., 2012). Thus, the responsibility for vulnerability, risk and crisis communication extends to IC, in addition to the disciplines of public affairs or digital communication (Theaker, 2022). In a critical situation, IC involves all those communicative processes that take place between managers and employees, or between co-workers themselves, before, during and after such a scenario (Heide and Simonsson, 2019).

2.3. The role of internal communication during the coronavirus pandemic

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) officially classified the COVID-19 virus as a global pandemic. The evolution of the pandemic and its management was different in all affected countries, but personal and professional habits were altered to a greater or lesser extent in all of them. For the people responsible for communication in organisations, the spread of COVID-19 did not fit into any known strategic crisis communication model (Xifra, 2020). Nor was it a catalogued crisis (Coombs, 2020), so there was no precedent on what kind of solutions could have been formulated. There were only a few previous studies that addressed measures on how to optimise the communication process in another health crisis, the Ebola crisis in Spain (González, Medina and Iglesias, 2017), or to deal with events such as the financial crisis of 2008-2009 (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015), internal fraud (Strandberg and Vigsø, 2016), or the communication approach in the event of the death of an employee due to an accident at work (Mazzei et al., 2012).

Although this health crisis had no precedent in the extant typologies of crisis, the WHO itself stated that communication expertise was as essential as epidemiological training (World Health Organization, 2005). In such circumstances, organisational executive teams needed, on the one hand, to stay

well connected with their employees to ensure the correct linkage with objectives, and to provide guidance in the face of the procedural, technological and structural changes that were taking place. At the same time, they also needed information, reassurance and support (Ruck and Men, 2021; IC Kollektiv, 2020). An uncertain context required flexibility and speed in decision-making, along with a great deal of transparency, agility and credibility (Horney, Pasmore and O'Shea, 2010). All this in its turn demonstrated the need to make specific investments in strong and solvent virtual solutions (Cuenca-Fontbona, Compte-Pujol and Zeler, 2022).

Seen from a transformational hypothesis, it can be postulated that, against the context of the coronavirus health crisis, the role of IC in organisations adapted and intensified in the face of the new work situation for employees; and constructed frameworks and narratives within temporal settings that were sensitive and accommodating to the events as they unfolded, thereby strengthening identification with the organisation and the sense of legitimacy and collective belonging. Based on this approach, two objectives and three research questions were formulated.

3. Objectives

The main objective of this research was to find out whether the role of IC in the organisations examined has been transformed or transubstantiated as a result of the situation caused by the COVID-19 health crisis. A secondary objective was to find out what new challenges the discipline must face.

This study was based on three research questions:

1. RQ1. What was the role of internal communication before the coronavirus pandemic?
2. RQ2. Has the role of internal communication changed during the coronavirus pandemic?
3. RQ3. What are the challenges for the role of internal communication since the coronavirus pandemic?

4. Methodology

First, the literature specialising in public relations and corporate communication was reviewed, and specifically, that which deals with IC and internal crisis communication. Then a semi-structured interview was designed, tested and conducted with a sample of experts selected for their professional profiles.

4.1. Sample

The interviews were conducted by videoconference, within the framework of distance research methods (Lichtman, 2006), between April 2020 and June

2021, using a purposive sampling approach of N=30 functional communication or IC managers with more than five years of experience. The sample size was determined by the saturation principle. All participants were members of Dircom, the Association of Directors of Communication.¹ Given Dircom's high level of representativeness, this constitutes a quality sample. Contact information was obtained from the latest Dircom 2017 public directory, and contacts were obtained, one by one, from various sources and by hand (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Informants from locations in Spain with the highest business presence (Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville and Bilbao) who matched the inclusion criteria and were aged between 36 and 57 years old were invited to participate.

4.2. Questionnaire and qualitative analysis

To create the interview, a review of the scientific literature was performed and a Mini-Delphi (Landeta, 2006) was designed and conducted with five experts in this area of knowledge, both professionals and academics.

The interview was derived from the objectives and research questions. The phases of interview development were conducted according to Gillham (2001): the interview script was prepared, the questionnaire was pilot tested with six people, refined, then the 30 interviews were conducted and transcribed. Finally, the information was analysed, and a preliminary report was written.

The questionnaire of 23 open-ended questions was divided into three blocks. The first section requested information on the structure of the communication department, as well as details of the performance and influence of IC before the health crisis. The second section dealt with this function during the pandemic. The last section invited reflection on the future direction of the discipline.

Next, the three stages of qualitative content analysis were deployed: pre-analysis; exploitation of the material using Atlas.ti; and processing results to formulate meaningful interpretations (Gibbs, 2007). This analysis was conducted collaboratively by three researchers to ensure stability and inter-observer reliability.

5. Presentation of results and discussion

5.1. The role of internal communication before the coronavirus pandemic

The number of people dedicated to IC in the large Spanish companies analysed varies from between one and five, or exceptionally more than five peo-

1. Dircom association is the most representative professional association of communication managers in Spanish companies, institutions and consultancy firms: <<https://www.dircom.org/>>

ple, data that coincide with the reports by ASCAI and FEIEA (2018), Dialenga (2021) and Gallagher (2022). Furthermore, 63.3% of these companies have a specific IC department, compared to 36.6% which integrate this function into the communication or human resources departments. The figures in Table 1 are significantly higher than those reported by ASCAI and FEIEA, or in the 2018 Spanish-level study by Dircom (cf. Aced et al. 2021). In either case, responsibility for IC is concentrated at headquarters, often with a small number of people solely to carry out IC work with a local criterion.

Table 1. Typology of internal communication management in large Spanish companies

Type of structure	Percentage
Internal department	82.35%
In-house department + outsourcing	5.89%
Outsourcing	11.76%

Source: author.

83.3% of these organisations manage IC autonomously, 6.6% combine internal management and outsourcing, and 10% have this work outsourced, information consistent with that reported earlier in the Dialenga report (2021) (Table 2).

Table 2. Presence of a dedicated internal communications department in large Spanish companies

Dedicated IC department	Percentage
Yes	64.7%
No	35.3%

Source: authors.

The results of the study show important similarities in the views expressed by communication department professionals with respect to the role and responsibilities of IC. In the first instance, they assert that IC is responsible for keeping all employees informed of everything relating to the company. Moreover, IC contributes to the correct execution of work, and preserves compliance with rules, all according to the transmission-oriented model as described by Cuenca and Verazzi (2018, 2020), Heide and Simonsson (2019) and Zerfass et al. (2021). Other day-to-day issues that are of interest and bring value to employees also fall under the umbrella of IC, namely: the corporate credo; decisions about goals; corporate and business management; organizational change; structural movements; incidents and solutions; development, training and knowledge; new projects and initiatives; financial results; and future programs, etc.

Before, during and after the pandemic, the function has been, is and will be the same: to keep all employees informed. (Informant 15, IC, commerce and distribution manager)

But these organizations also understand that IC is part of the motivational and satisfaction processes aligned with the company's values. Thus, they also describe it as the guarantor of employee empowerment and of strengthening their leading role in all the company's transformation processes.

[IC should be an integral part of all processes] to take a very active role in the transformation of [the organization], that is why we try to be present and engaged in company all projects. (Informant 7, Dircom, Construction, Iron and Steel, Energy and Electricity)

IC is responsible for fostering employee engagement and support, which they call employee engagement or associate engagement, and they assert that it has a significant influence on the decision to stay or leave an organization relating to morale, success, growth, corporate reputation or an enriching culture.

Keeping employees engaged and protecting the company's reputation are the main objectives of IC. (Informant 4, Dircom, Commerce and Distribution)

This model, based on dialogue and linkages, facilitates the transparent and smooth circulation of information, and makes the habits of sharing, coordinating, collaborating, engaging, integrating and involving all employees in the same business project viable. This view correlates with the most current literature research on IC (Berceruelo, 2020; Cuenca and Verazzi, 2020; Qin and Men, 2022; Ruck and Men, 2021; Tkalac, 2021; Theaker, 2022; Lee, 2022).

5.2. The role of internal communication during the coronavirus pandemic

There was total unanimity (100%) regarding the fact that during the period studied no structural changes took place. Instead, pressure on the role of IC can be observed in terms of the demand for greater contact with staff; the need to circulate information and advice to deal with and reduce any concerns or sense of isolation; digital training; and fostering dialogue, transparency and trust in performance (Verazzi et al., 2022; Aced-Toledano and Miquel-Segarra, 2021; Theaker, 2022).

The roles and responsibilities have not been modified, but the intensity may have increased because the cadence of everything that has been done in IC has increased. (Informant 4, Dircom, Commerce and Distribution)

Immersed in the pandemic, the people in charge of the companies studied also agreed (100%) that the function of IC had not changed as defined in

the literature, but the intensity of its performance and relevance within the companies had. They also explained that IC had assumed a coordinating role for all messages circulated, and that three priority areas of information had been identified as the main focus: protect the health and well-being of employees; maintain commitment and trust in the company; and reinforce leadership and business continuity. These priorities coincide with the findings of Castro-Martínez and Díaz-Morilla (2020), Qin and Men (2022) and Santoso et al. (2022). During the period of crisis studied, workers were in a situation of maximum alert and uncertainty. For this reason, those responsible for IC faced the urgent need to provide members of their organizations with direct and transparent information, advice and instructions with agility and speed. The priority was their employees. Different mechanisms were also involved, in general to keep employees engaged, linked and connected to the organization, since some of the organizations included in this study had to close, in compliance with regulations and measures dictated by governmental bodies.

We had to coordinate everything that was issued [...]. People were in an uproar and what we had to do from IC was to eliminate uncertainties, transmit security, confidence and support, because suddenly we were all teleworking, but alone at home. We had two main priorities: to protect the health of our employees and clients, and business continuity [...] Every day until the State of Emergency was over, they received an e-mail with everything that was happening. (Informant 2, Dircom, Automotive, Transportation, Highways and Parking)

Although the health crisis was not among the main issues, 93.33% of the professionals interviewed stated that their organizations were trained to deal with any eventuality as, in the previous two years, they had prepared crisis manuals and contingency plans, and had also practiced numerous drills. Foresight was a determining factor in managing the new situation.

From minute zero a crisis committee was created with the communication department present, together with the lawyers, the CEOs and the positions of maximum responsibility. There have been decisions that have come from the communications department. (Informant 19, Head of IC, Commerce and Distribution)

Being on the crisis management committee was the key accelerator of IC work, according to 100% of the interviewees. Even so, 90% recognized that this presence had not led to an active and strategic role for IC, but rather a reactive and tactical one, due to the late incorporation of IC on those committees. Nevertheless, it encouraged the capacity to adapt and act quickly. The health crisis required a greater amount of time on the part of these professionals, and more resources. Circumstances precipitated the practice of IC, especially in the most severe phase of lockdown. On the other hand, from

mid-2021 and coinciding with the peak of the fourth wave (March 2021) and the beginning of the fifth wave (June 2021), IC evolved into a significantly more strategic exercise, which also coincided with the incorporation of new resources for its deployment.

With this health crisis, IC has acquired a very strategic role in the company [...] During the crisis we have realised the importance of IC [...] We have also reinforced some communication channels and we have interacted with departments with which, perhaps, we did not have so much interaction. (Informant 20, Dircom, Insurance)

All the organisations in the study had a crisis manual and an IC policy with established mechanisms, processes and responsibilities, including contingency plans at different levels. However, all (100%) informants recognised that with the pandemic, the manual has been built on the basis of the needs that had arisen, due to the lack of background information, for example, on the communication of a positive case, or on issues relating to the reorganisation of the company.

We have followed what we had in the crisis plans, multiplied by many times, because now the manual is no longer a crisis manual, but a day-to-day manual. (Informant 23, Dircom, Chemist and Pharmacist)

Eighty percent of the organisations set up active listening systems and established direct communication channels with management to facilitate the direct discussion of information received. Others designed questionnaires to verify the objectives of knowledge, understanding or action pursued by the actions being pursued. In other cases, daily videos or newsletters were created, with surveys to help check whether the information was being received correctly. Some organizations incorporated collective forums and webinars to gather employee opinions. Still others used the features of some Apps to ask questions and vote for decision-making among employees.

Overall, the situation caused by COVID-19 accelerated the need to invest in robust virtual solutions. 46.6% of the companies studied had strengthened the media ecosystem with new communication channels (informal and hierarchical WhatsApp and Zoom groups, or Yammer); there had been interaction with areas and departments that had not been so participative until then. In addition, a more emotional tone had been instituted in the content, in order to generate community, stimulate the sharing of any emerging issues and feelings among the staff, try to be closer, provide company and reduce loneliness. Instilling calm, security and encouragement in this type of situation had been the main challenges of IC during the pandemic. This is in line with the findings of Ruck and Men (2021) and the IC Kollektif report (2020).

In the same period, recruitment of additional IC professionals led to a 10-25% increase in their number. On the other hand, only 16.6% of the

organisations in the study increased the budget allocated to strengthening IC during this period.

5.3. The function of internal communication after the coronavirus pandemic

When asked about the challenges lying ahead for IC, all the cases studied declared that they had faced unknown scenarios that are now intermingled with the emergence of new key strategic objectives for IC deriving from the pandemic. These key strategic objectives are as follows:

- Provide employees, wherever they are, with clear, simple, useful and real-time answers, in order to reduce the uncertainty of the situation.

[...] it is necessary to share the information, to inform, to have the professionals informed, to say things when they happen and not to wait, that you should not wait, only if you do not know what to say or if the situation changes at minute one. That is, even if you change every day, communicate it. (Informant 23, Dircom, Chemist and Pharmacist)

The next step is to have an IC tool that brings together all the content that the brand generates and makes it available to employees in a much more dynamic way. (Informant 2, Dircom, Automotive, Transportation, Highways and Parking)

[...] Evolve from information to conversation. And this challenge leads to another challenge, which is managing misinformation. In addition to being able to give each employee the information they need, and to avoid “infoxiation”, which can be due in large part to the generation of a lot of content of low interest. (Informant 27, Dircom, Financial Entities, Banks, Savings Banks, Managers)

- Offer essential training that enables employees to face the accelerated digital transformation that teleworking or hybrid work entails, informing them about the availability of technological tools and cybersecurity, and raising awareness of the ethical implications of accuracy in online interactions and data driven operations.

[...] Mainly knowing how to explain the transformation internally. We have a strategic plan that is transforming the organization and people must adapt to the changes. Things that we say were done one way today will be done differently tomorrow. Resilience and the ability to communicate internally are therefore important. (Informant 2, Dircom, Chemist and Pharmacist)

Explain the numerous changes at the level of organisational processes: digitalisation; sustainability issues and improvements in dependence on raw materials that need to be explained internally. Explain all our work on diversity and inclusion, we are a very large company with thousands of employees

all over the world, with a lot of geographical diversity, gender, etc. (Informant 17, Dircom, Audits, Consultants and Law Firms)

- Provide emotional support through content focused on health, well-being, gratitude and safety: mental and emotional health.

Leaders/people have realized that we can all be vulnerable, and I think this nearness and proximity will remain. (Informant 2, Dircom, Chemist and Pharmacist)

The respect and responsibility you have as a company are very important to make people feel good, because this enables them to continue working. Because obviously if the employee is well and feels motivated, the continuity of the business can be guaranteed. (Informant 19, Head of IC, Commerce and Distribution)

- Stimulate the worker through social innovation, collaboration, empathy, reliability and trustworthiness with the company's corporate actions.

It is also possible that communication and the informative tone will be relegated, and that a more empathetic, closer tone will be sought, and above all the effectiveness of internal communication. The company must continue to communicate corporate messages without them becoming bullshit or spam. (Informant 1, Dircom, Tourism)

A lot has been done, and there is still a lot of room for improvement. Above all, we want to engage the workshop staff, who believe more in the company. We are going to set ourselves the challenge of increasing commitment and pride in being a member of the organisation. Values Week and other team-building activities. (Informant 13, IC, Food, Beverages and Tobacco)

- Actively listen to the staff in order to discuss emerging issues of concern: the ambiguity of the situation, business continuity in a teleworking model, process optimization, hot desk offices, employee self-management and self-leadership, multi-tasking, heavier workloads that go hand in hand with increased amounts of stress, privacy, the redefinition of the work-life balance, the gradual return to offices, and the reasons behind decisions taken by the organization in the new situation.

[...] make opportunities out of the tools so that they help me to communicate with the worker in a personalised way, taking care of each worker individually. (Informant 15, IC, Commerce and Distribution)

- Informatively assist relatives and close friends of the company employees while they were on sick leave or were mourning the deaths of closed people who passed away during the pandemic.

[...] that the institution cannot remain in the global IC, that more and more you have to be one to one with the workers. It takes time, but you have to do it. It has been seen that each person experiences any situation in very different ways and this, which was already known, becomes even more important when you have to call them to express your condolences or to encourage them so that they don't feel alone. (Informant 29, Dircom, Culture)

- Seek to align employees with the company, continue transmitting the corporate creed, and reinforce the feeling and pride of belonging.

[...] Attracting and retaining talent. Seduce them at the beginning and keep them afterwards. Brand perception also plays a very important role here. The moment of truth in IC is in the day-to-day: how you look at me, what you do to understand and listen to me and what you do with what I am proposing to you. (Informant 17, Dircom, Auditors, Consultants and Law Firms)

IC helps us to overcome the difficulty of conveying the purpose, so that people understand the meaning of the decisions we make. (Informant 15, IC, Commerce and Distribution)

IC is a key lever for identity generation and sharing the company's culture. It helps to reinforce the feeling of being part of a common goal. (Informant 23, Dircom, Chemist and Pharmacist)

- Work on the communication skills of the dominant coalition and leadership as preventive or crisis preparedness practice.

IC must be the task of all the people in the organization, all must be internal communicators, especially the people who lead teams where there is still a long way to go in terms of awareness, training and culture of internal communication. (Informant 17, Dircom, Auditors, Consultants and Law Firms)

- Help shape and guide actions as well as orient decisions of the dominant coalition so that the messages they want and need to convey are clearly understood.

IC should facilitate the transmission of messages from the general directorate directly, with transparency, seeking to generate trust and clarity. (Informant 27, Dircom Financial Entities, Banks, Savings Banks, Managers)

- Arrange the organization's worldview around the digital environment and distance.

We have all become more digitalised, more teleworking, less contact... and this may have had a negative impact on engagement, but IC has helped to keep us together. The challenge, with its risk, was for the virtual to supplant the physical, which at the time was absent. (Informant 19, Head of IC, Commerce and Distribution)

6. Conclusions

The results obtained provided answers to the three research questions (RQs) linked to the previously established objectives.

In relation to RQ1, one of the first issues is related to the original role of IC, to circulate information, focusing on content and communication channels. Currently, this transmission-oriented model coexists with a people-centred communication model based on dialogue, networking and personal bonding.

Regarding RQ2, it was shown that the departments responsible for IC in organizations did not change their operations during the health crisis, but instead intensified their workload and increased their presence, as well as their strategic and leading role in decision-making, characterized by agility and readiness to attend to the fast-moving nature of the concerns, routines and new behaviours of employees. There are clear signs of a more human, relaxed and informal tone in the management of a remote, mediated professional presence, together with a more empathetic approach to improvisation to help solve domestic problems that affect the daily work of the employee.

There is agreement about the accidental (not substantial) transformation of IC due to the health crisis, i.e., the function adapted to a new reality without losing its essence. Thus, the objectives and topics of IC during the pandemic revolved around basic issues typical of these circumstances: the health, well-being and safety of employees. In turn, efforts were made to preserve trust and maintain the employee's feeling of identification and belonging to the company.

As for RQ3, the functions of IC were the same before and during the pandemic, although COVID-19 admittedly meant putting the employee at the centre of any decision, by promoting a climate for active communication behaviours to encourage knowledge sharing, collaboration and creativity. Certainly, the recent health crisis was an accelerating factor from a strategic perspective; it triggered the digital transformation of IC channels and compelled companies to face new concerns and make adjustments to corporate culture, with a new tone and style of communication towards internal audiences.

The aim of this research has been to enrich the literature on IC and internal crisis communication, along with some practical implications to help communication professionals and their departments to adapt and improve their IC in a health crisis.

7. Limitations and future lines of research

Despite the results obtained, this study has certain limitations. Firstly, neither the selected universe nor the sample analysed is representative of all Spanish companies or the IC managers who exercise their functional responsibility in Spain. This is due to the lack of a documented register to identify

the total population for sampling. Moreover, the type of research technique (interview) restricts comparative analysis or sectoral conclusions. Nevertheless, the number of interviewees provides an adequate basis to detect patterns in their responses corresponding to the practice of IC before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and allows us to consider the results of the research as general trends in Spain.

As for future lines of research, it would be interesting to learn more about the type of decisions that those responsible for IC have been allowed to make, in order to understand the reasons behind the professional's actions relating to IC during the pandemic.

In addition, this research will be extended to IC professionals from organisations in other countries in order to contrast and correlate practices at an international level.

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