

## The Importance of Internal Communication in Hospital Management

Jana Holá

Department of Informatics, Management and Radiology, Faculty of Health Studies, University of Pardubice

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The aim of the research was to establish the state and importance of internal communication in a particular health care facility and recommend improvements.

**Methods:** In line with the objective of the study, a qualitative survey in the form of in-depth interviews with the top management of the hospital was carried out, together with an analysis of the basic prerequisites (elements) of effective internal communication. Principal factors affecting internal communication were identified, and their impact and importance were subsequently verified by quantitative research – a questionnaire survey among employees.

**Results:** The study verified hypotheses regarding the importance of internal communication and its impact on professional behaviour and performance, evaluated basic prerequisites for effective internal communication, and provided suggestions for their improvement.

**Conclusion:** The importance of internal communication in the monitored hospital has been confirmed as significant. Employees perceive internal communication as important and agree that it affects their work performance and behaviour. While at the onset of our research, some of the preconditions of a functioning internal communication were not set correctly, subsequently the hospital took action to improve them.

### KEY WORDS

internal communication, management, hospital

### INTRODUCTION

The latest survey of the European Agency for Safety and Protection of Health at Work generated a list of the most common sources of work-related stress. In the overall score, which included not only the EU countries (31 in total), the leading stressors were both communication between the management and employees and insufficient communication among employees. In the Czech Republic, poor communication appears in the top three rankings, much more significantly than in other countries. As many as 62% of employees agree that their work performance suffers due to the poor communication among colleagues, while for 65 % employees, the main stressor is poor communication between the management and employees. The top rank (79%) as the greatest source of stress belongs to communication with clients, customers, patients, students. In other countries, the list is dominated by other stressors, e. g. lack of time, inadequate security, overtime, discrimination, etc. No other country records such a strong dissatisfaction with communication, according to the survey. (EASHW, 2010)

The results of the study Communication ROI Study, conducted by the consulting firm Watson Wyatt Worldwide, verified that companies with highly effective internal communications achieve better financial results and significantly higher organizational stability that enhances results. In his article, Yates (2006, p 73) transforms the results in best practices in communication, the setting of which demonstrably improves the employee engagement and reduces turnover. Fig. 1 illustrates the impact that effective communication practices have on dedication and hence on the performance of the organization.

Both of the above studies show that the state of internal communications in an organization can be a powerful motivator or demotivator. Few Czech companies focus on internal communications in a systematic manner. (Holá, 2006, p 45) The concept of communication is discussed in various contexts and approaches; specific internal communications remain an unclear concept for organizations. Communication in general is characterized as a process of sharing certain information in order to eliminate or reduce uncertainty for

both parties to the communication. Communication is also a two-way process aimed at shared understanding and collaboration. Table 1 shows diverse approaches to communication.

Although approaches vary, they share the belief that we build the social world through communication interactions. The influence of communication on conduct and behaviour is summed up by Miller in his Theory of Planned Behavior (2009, p 127). Organizations, however, prefer the flow of information from outside, and the management, often out of ignorance, underestimates systematic internal communications. (Holá, 2006, p 4)

Internal communication that takes place within the organization pervades all processes and is the link in the management process of the entire organization. According to Wright (2009), the elementary management needs in communication are based on human resource management, corporate culture, decision making, conflict resolution, change management, and use of technologies. A more comprehensive range of internal communication in terms of its objectives, key processes, and methodologies, and its importance for the organization is provided by Holá (2006) in her

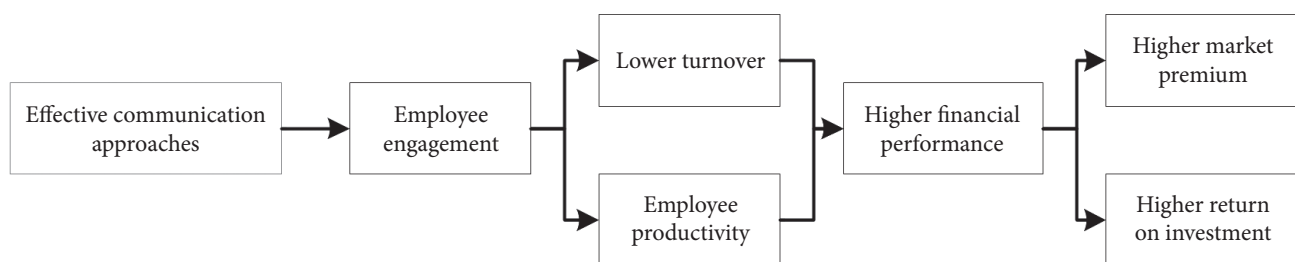
monograph. Likewise, the importance of internal communication is mentioned by the authors of publications on personnel management, e.g. Baron and Armstrong (2008), Koubek (2004), and authors dealing with corporate marketing communications (Horáková et al., 2008, p 124).

Communication between the management of health care centres and their personnel is studied e.g. by Gladkij et al. (2003).

In terms of the contents, internal communication is defined as the integration of three main areas representing its main objectives:

- 1 Providing employees the information they need to perform their jobs,
- 2 Linking the information and motivation necessary for collaboration,
- 3 Forming desirable work-related attitudes (professional behaviour and conduct) necessary for stable employees and organization.

Ineffective communication is manifested primarily through insufficient, outdated or ambiguous information and a lack of feedback.



**Fig. 1** Influence of internal communication on the performance of the organization (Yates, 2006, p 73)

**Tab. 1** Diverse approaches to communication and their use in internal communications according to Miller (Miller, 2009, p 13)

Concept	Theoretical definition of communication as	Sample application in an organization
Rhetoric	Practical art of expression	important part of communication strategy in crisis management
Semiotic	Intermediation of own mark, communication as a means	Organization develops and maintains an identity through corporate symbols
Phenomenological	Dialogue, based on experiencing the difference; communication as a phenomenon	Use of dialogue for negotiation in a conflict among employees
Cyber	Information processing	Identifying optimal ways to build a communication network for employees, incl. teleworking
Sociopsychological	Expression, interaction, mutual influence	Use of information about an individual and use of communication skills to prevent conflicts
Sociocultural	Creating and transforming a social code	Use in merging organizational, national, and ethnical differences in multinational corporations
Critical	Discourse reflection	Confrontation with potential problems of sexual harassment at workplace through programmes designed for a shift in the concept of equality

These deficiencies result in distorted information, which, in combination with the lack of space for its clarification, fundamentally affects work performance and may even result in its paralysis.

In this respect, internal communication (including communication between the management and employees, team communication, and personal communication during collaboration) forms an important working condition. (Holá, 2011, p 5)

Internal communication is a blend of HR work, internal marketing, and management communication. The basic prerequisites (elements) that determine its functioning include: corporate culture based on moral and ethical values,

- a unified management team of the organization and full responsibility for the communication of the organization,
- defined division of labour, organizational structure, definition of the main processes in the organization,
- declared strategy of the organization and the resulting communication strategy, communication plan,
- declared social policy supported by HR work in order to find mutual respect between the organization and the employees and the fulfilment of mutual expectations,
- effective internal marketing, especially internal public relations that affect the relationship employees have to the organization,
- communication skills of managers,
- open communication that includes feedback,
- technology – setting information and communication infrastructures to meet the needs of internal communications.

All these elements determine effective communication, influence each other, and, together in synergy, build the quality of communication. (Holá, 2011, p 78)

## METHODS

This survey was based on methodology verified on a long-term basis by the author (Holá, 2011, p 92). It includes:

- 1 An analytical part of the monitored centre using standard analyses (SLEPT, SWOT) and an analysis of the prerequisites of a functioning internal communication, which generate the most important factors that affect internal communication. The basic sources of the analysis include internal documents of the organization that regulate the internal communication within the organization, and structured (evaluation of the basic elements of internal communication) and in-depth interviews (on functioning and malfunctioning communication) with

top management (deputies). In consequence, the potential causes of the inefficient internal communications were identified.

- 2 Identified deficiencies in the internal elements of communication, ie modifiable factors were validated with a quantitative questionnaire-based survey of the employees. The questionnaire therefore focused on the individual elements of internal communications and on its importance for the employees. The questionnaire was anonymous; employees completed the questionnaire online (the application was installed on the server of the University of Pardubice). Only fully completed questionnaires qualified for the assessment; anonymous, randomly assigned passwords prevented multiple forms completed by one person. Selected results were tested for statistical significance using frequency distribution statistics, a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$  according to Pecáková (1998).
- 3 Statistically validated results were submitted to the hospital management based on the resulting document Hospital's Internal Communications. Studies of available literature (Holá, 2011) in combination with the author's experience facilitated proposals for streamlining internal communication.

## RESULTS OF A SURVEY OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

The organization where the internal communication survey was held in the summer of 2009 is a type-2 hospital (a health care institution providing acute inpatient care in a minimum of three of the 7 basic disciplines). Of the total of 567 employees of the hospital, 316 (56 %) took part in the survey. Distribution of respondents: 13% doctors, 72% non-physicians, and 15% other employees (administration). The questionnaire survey looked into potential sources of inefficient internal communications. Employees evaluated the setting of the basic prerequisites of effective communication and the importance of communication for their professional performance, work-related conduct and behaviour. The survey reflected the findings of previous analyses and interviews with managers. The results of the evaluation are summarised in Table 2.

Findings confirming the importance of communication and employee satisfaction, which should motivate the management to improvements, are as follows:

- The majority of employees (84%) are satisfied, believe their work is meaningful and the hospital care adequate (60%), and are loyal to the hospital (94%).
- Whole 80% of employees surveyed agree that a sufficiently effective communication (functioning communication in the work team, sufficient updat-

ed information, room for clarifications, etc.) has an impact on their work behaviour and performance.

- For the majority (85%) workers, communication with the hospital management is very important.

Each of the above majorities was tested for statistical significance with a frequency distribution test, significance level of 5%. (Pecáková, 1998, p 87)

An analysis based on basic prerequisites and interviews with managers identified the main barriers to communication. These were subsequently verified with a questionnaire. Based on the summary of the current internal communication in the hospital, the following measures were proposed:

In organizational culture:

- Reinforce the corporate culture – e.g. by declaring a code of ethics, punishing misconducts, and building an open atmosphere; create a fair environment; promote cooperation.
- Showcase the work of each team to improve cooperation. Furthermore, introduce public awarding of the best employees of the time period (for a project or based on ratings) which will engage all employees or teams.
- Introduce uniform standards – support for regular staff evaluation and remuneration.
- Create a feedback system (suggestion boxes, intranet discussions).
- Create a higher authority status (ombudsman) for building a fair environment.

In managerial communication:

- Develop managerial communication skills.
- Specify the powers and responsibilities, the competency and conditions for the performance of functions (create job descriptions for managers).
- Declare mutual understanding and willingness to cooperate among managers (support each other and encourage cooperation among subordinates).
- Establish clear rules for management meetings (provide participants with the schedule and materials in advance; firm direction of the discussion; room for discussion; suppression of adverse behaviour and clear declaration of mutual respect), adopt uniform conclusions, and transfer information from the meetings.

In specific activities of internal communication:

- Assign an individual/s responsible for internal communication, preferably from senior management; equip them with competencies and create room for their work.
- Develop a communication strategy, a plan, and set up channels of communication (meetings, intranet, evaluation).
- Improve the concept of the hospital newspaper, consider a similar format for internal communications or target a section of the newspaper to the staff.
- Introduce controlled internal (personnel) marketing; make better use of electronic means of communication, e.g. for regular e-mail news; use the printed news and notice boards.
- Transform the intranet from an electronic bulletin board to a communication portal.

**Tab. 2** Evaluation of internal communication prerequisites

Prerequisite of functioning communication	Current evaluation
1 Corporate culture based on moral and ethical values	Weak; with elements of injustice, distrust and favoritism
2 Cohesive team of the company management and full responsibility	Management is divided, palpable barriers, lack of mutual respect
3 Defined organizational structure, processes, and work distribution	Inconsistently declared in the management, ambiguities, poorly established communication channels
4 Communication strategy and communication plan	There is no strategy or plan
5 Personnel policy and functional personnel work	Poorly defined and declared; inefficient system of remuneration
6 Functioning internal marketing	Intuitive, inconsistent, untapped potential
7 Communicative competence of the management	Very good; functioning in teams; however, no communication between the senior management and employees
8 Feedback system in open communication	System missing; moreover, inhibitions and fears
9 Technologies	Obsolete, inadequate trends in information and communication technologies

- Organize internal training on the use of e-mail and on the use of technology in communication in general.
- Publish the results of the study and discuss the plan of gradual improvements under new conditions.

## DISCUSSION

Internal communication in an organization is frequently overlooked as a management tool despite the fact that many studies have shown its fundamental impact on the work attitudes and performance of employees and thus the performance of the whole organization. The findings of our survey disclose the current situation. The introduction to the article mentions two important studies that show that as one of the work conditions, internal communication strongly influences the engagement and performance of employees. (EASHW 2010, Yates, 2006) Effective communication as a stimulator generates a positive social climate, conditions for cooperation, and facilitates task fulfilment and self-motivation. Malfunctioning communication becomes a stressor that disturbs work relationships, discourages, and paralyzes. Employees of the surveyed hospital confirmed that effective internal communication is important for their work. An analysis of the current internal communication revealed an underestimation of its importance by the management, the misunderstanding and ignorance of the contents of internal communication, but also the will to improve communication. Hospital managements are often overwhelmed by changes in the external environment they need to implement in the organization. The constant changes in the healthcare system often overshadow the internal coordination within the organization, occupying the room for improvements in the management and leadership. Most hospitals also struggle with insufficient funds, and solutions associated with internal communication are not a priority to be invested in.

Generally the most frequent reason that managers give as the cause of malfunctioning communication is the lack of time (often, however, it is also ignorance of the issue). On the other hand, most common investments in internal communications are reported to be made into information and communication technologies, which may be credited with too much importance despite the fact they certainly improve communication when used correctly. (Holá, 2006, p 46) In health care, the lack of time of the management combines with the lack of funding for information and communication technologies, a fact that severely complicates internal communication. However, in this hospital, it is primarily the management's will to improve which is the key for any amelioration.

## CONCLUSION

The hospital management adopted the declared importance and influence of internal communication as an important work condition that affects performance at work and the conduct and behaviour of employees. Quality Manager was assigned with developing a plan to improve internal communications as recommended. The project of improving internal communication formed a part of the hospital's policy of quality improvement in 2010. A communication plan was therefore soon developed, together with a code of ethics (including its distribution and propagation) and the position of an ombudsman dedicated to internal and external problems. Over time, periodic evaluation of employees including the management was implemented for all nursing-related jobs. The standard, however, could not be implemented in other professional fields.

Since the beginning, senior management has strived to maximize awareness and discussion through regular meetings held with employees (including evaluation of the team for an innovative achievement) and adopted a new "supervision" project designed for the evaluation of work conditions and the functioning of each department and of the hospital as an employer from the employee perspective. The intranet has been improved to serve the required communication and is also used more. The senior and line managements are gradually completing communication training. Based on the feedback within supervisions, communication in the hospital has been improving and the management's efforts for mutual communication are appreciated. In some cases, interdepartmental cooperation has improved. In conclusion, the efficiency of internal communication has been improving and mutual trust between the management and employees has gradually been building; proactive staff is increasingly cooperating. The hospital management considers the study a successfully implemented project.

## REFERENCES

- BARON, A., ARMSTRONG, M. 2007. *Human Capital Management: Achieving Added Value Through People*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. London: Kogan Page, 2007. 226 p. ISBN 978-0-7494-4938-4.
- EASHW – Evropské agentura pro bezpečnost a ochranu zdraví. 2010. *European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risk*. Last revision 15 Feb 2011 [cit. 2011-06-06]. Available from WWW: [http://osha.europa.eu/en/slc\\_cse\\_search\\_results](http://osha.europa.eu/en/slc_cse_search_results).
- GLADKIJ, I. et al. 2003. *Management ve zdravotnictví*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Brno: Computer Press, 2003. 380 p. ISBN 80-7226-996-8.
- HOLÁ, J. 2006. *Interní komunikace ve firmě*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Brno: Computer Press, 2006. 235 p. ISBN 978-80-251-1250.



HORÁKOVÁ, I., STEJSKALOVÁ, D., ŠKAPOVÁ, H.  
2008. *Strategie firemní komunikace*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Prague:  
Management Press, 2008. 254 p. ISBN 978-80-7261.  
HOLÁ, J. 2011. *Jak zlepšit interní komunikaci*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Brno:  
Computer Press, 2011. 317 p. ISBN 978-80-251-2636-3.  
KOUBEK, J. 2004. *Řízení pracovního výkonu*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed.  
Prague: Management Press, 2004. 209 p.  
ISBN 978-80-7261-116-1.  
MILLER, K. 2009. *Communication Theories: Perspectives,  
processes and context*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Boston: Wadsworth  
Cengage Learning, 2009. 355 p. ISBN 0-07-293794-7.  
PECÁKOVÁ, I., NOVÁK, I. HERZMANN, J. 1998.  
*Pořizování a vyhodnocování dat ve výzkumech veřejného  
mínění*. Prague: Oeconomica, 2004. 145 p. University  
of Economics, Prague. ISBN 80-2450-753-6.

WRIGHT, M. 2009. *Gower handbook of Internal  
Communication*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Farnham: Gower Publishing,  
2009. 468 p. ISBN 0-5660-8689-1.  
YATES, K. 2006. Internal Communication Effectiveness  
Enhances Bottom-Line Results. *Journal  
of Organizational Excellence*. 2006, vol. 25, no. 3,  
p. 71–79. ISSN 1531-6653.

#### CONTACT DETAILS OF AUTHOR

Jana Holá  
Department of Informatics, Management, and Radiology  
Faculty of Health Studies  
University of Pardubice  
Průmyslová 395  
CZ-532 10 PARDUBICE  
Jana.hola@upce.cz