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INTERNAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Company strategies and working experience of employees

Preface by Yan Jin

Centre for Employee Relations and Communication
Università IULM

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“Carlo A. Ricciardi”

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Preface

Yan Jin, Ph.D.

University of Georgia, USA

Kurt Lewin, one of the modern pioneers of organizational, social and applied psychology, once said “there is nothing so practical as a good theory.” Seventy years later, we academics are still striving to advance theory, hoping that our work will be useful for practice. This need becomes more pressing than ever when it comes to the “sticky crisis” challenges, characterized by complex, challenging and recurring crisis issues, the resolution of which demands innovative academia-industry collaborative research. Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as a “sticky” public health crisis, confronting businesses, governments and communities globally. On the communication front, it has challenged both scholars and practitioners in terms of reassessing and rejuvenating our communication infrastructures and programs to 1) timely adapt to and proactively respond to the dynamics and certainties of an evolving health crisis, and 2) generate practical, evidence-based insights that inform effective and ethical communication internally and externally.

This eBook, *Internal Crisis Communication in the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic: Company Strategies and Working Experience of Employees*, edited by Alessandra Mazzei, Luca Quaratino, and Silvia Ravazzani, provides a thought leadership volume intersecting three essential areas in global pandemic communication management: internal communication, crisis management, and approaches to tackling unique threats and challenges posed by “sticky” public health crises (e.g., outbreak, epidemic, or pandemic) that often trigger organizational crises. By extracting essential knowledge and insights gained from the “Internal Crisis Communication in the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic” study led by the

Centre for Employee Relations and Communication (CERC) at Università IULM (Milan, Italy), the innovation and uniqueness of this eBook is threefold: timeliness, rich insights based on mix-method triangulation, and learnings applicable beyond the Italian context. First, the data gathering for this study started in February, 2020, obtaining real-time data along the health crisis timeline to monitor the evolution of internal crisis communication, among Italian corporations, in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Second, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to investigate 1) internal crisis communication strategies through interviews, focus groups, and a survey among managers, and 2) employees’ experience as self-reported via survey responses. Third, the key learnings and actionable recommendations serve as invaluable references to organizational leaders and crisis managers beyond Italy. By publishing the entire study in open source in English, the CERC at Università IULM, a model of university research group (URG) based on university-business collaborations, contributes to essential academia-industry knowledge creation and worldwide sharing.

As a member of the CERC’s Scientific Committee and a fellow Page Society member of the lead editor of this eBook, I am honored to write the preface and look forward to ongoing and future global collaboration between academic and professional communities. Congratulations to the editors, their research team and the CERC company partners for the publication of this groundbreaking work, an exemplar of theory-driven research that is immensely practical and meaningful to business and community resilience in times of a global pandemic.



Introduction

The study **Internal Crisis Communication in the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic** provides data and insights gathered in real time over the global pandemic we have been experiencing since February 2020.

The CERC at Università IULM has immediately launched an intense research program that monitored the evolution of internal crisis communication in the first year of the pandemic.

Findings are now available for both the academic and the professional communities as we need a major effort for knowledge creation to afford this unprecedented crisis.

The study has been carried out by the Working Group 2018-2020 and 2020-2022 @Centre for Employee Relations and Communication (CERC) operating at Università IULM.

It was supported by the Department of Business, Law, Economics, and Consumer Behavior "Carlo A. Ricciardi" of Università IULM.



CERC

Centre for Employee Relations and Communication (CERC) has the purpose of developing and spreading communication and organizational relations culture.

It carries out research, dissemination, training and consultancy projects on topics related to employee relations and communication.

It is supported by a scientific committee which ensures its connection with the main international centers of excellence in this field.

It houses the Working Group Employee Communication and is part of the Department of Business, Law, Economics and Consumer Behavior «Carlo A. Ricciardi».

It was established in 2016 as an evolution of the Employee Communication Laboratory, active at Università IULM since 2009.

Founded and directed by Alessandra Mazzei.

WG_EC

The **Working Group Employee Communication (WG_EC)** is dedicated to a two-year special research project in partnership with a group of companies.

It carries out a research project on an agreed topic.

Partner companies and Università IULM researchers meet regularly during the year for updates on the results of the research project and to delve into topics of interest for the WG_EC. The meetings are topic-focused and run in a peer to peer context.

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Continued on next page →



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Why a study on internal crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic?

In every crisis hitting companies, employee communication and relations come under the spotlight (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011, 2015). In the case of the Covid-19 emergency this happened more intensively than ever (Mazzei & Butera, 2021).

- First, in the case of a health crisis, unless a vaccine or medication is available, **communication is the only effective antidote** as it enables proper behavior (Fear-Banks, 2011). Increasingly, this counts inside an organization.
- Second, this specific crisis imposed **social distancing** through an immediate and intense working from home model. Therefore, the only link assuring **organizational cohesion** has been the communication of the organization with its employees and among employees.

These considerations pushed CERC at Università IULM to immediately activate a research program in order to monitor the evolution of internal crisis communication in the first year of the pandemic. Findings are now available for both the academic and the professional communities, with the aim that they can contribute to develop the knowledge that is necessary to deal with this unprecedented crisis.



In the case of a health crisis, unless a vaccine or medication is available, **communication is the only effective antidote** as it enables proper behavior

Communication assured **organizational cohesion** in a situation of forced **social distancing** due to working from home



What is internal crisis communication?

The raising interest in employee communication before, during and after a crisis occurs, is linked to the special relation employees have with their employer (Frandsen & Jahansen, 2011).

Internal crisis communication:

- is a **dynamic and broad process** including three phases: pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis
- includes the continuous communicative processes that take place **between managers and employees and among employees**
- highlights the **role of employees** as both receivers, senders and sensemakers in the communication arena
- is placed at the **interplay** with external management and communication.

Over the three dynamic stages of a crisis, internal communication plays different roles:

- **before a crisis occurs:** prevention is key and communication helps to enhance employee engagement, the quality of internal relationships, the organizational preparedness and crisis awareness
- **during the management of a crisis:** the adoption of effective internal crisis communication strategies is capable to support the exit from the crisis and the protection of the relational capital based on relationship quality and employee engagement
- **after a crisis:** internal communication is required to sustain the recovery and relaunch of the organization.

(Mazzei & Butera, 2021; Ravazzani & Mazzei, 2022)







CAMEO

Global financial crisis in 2009 and internal crisis communication in Italy

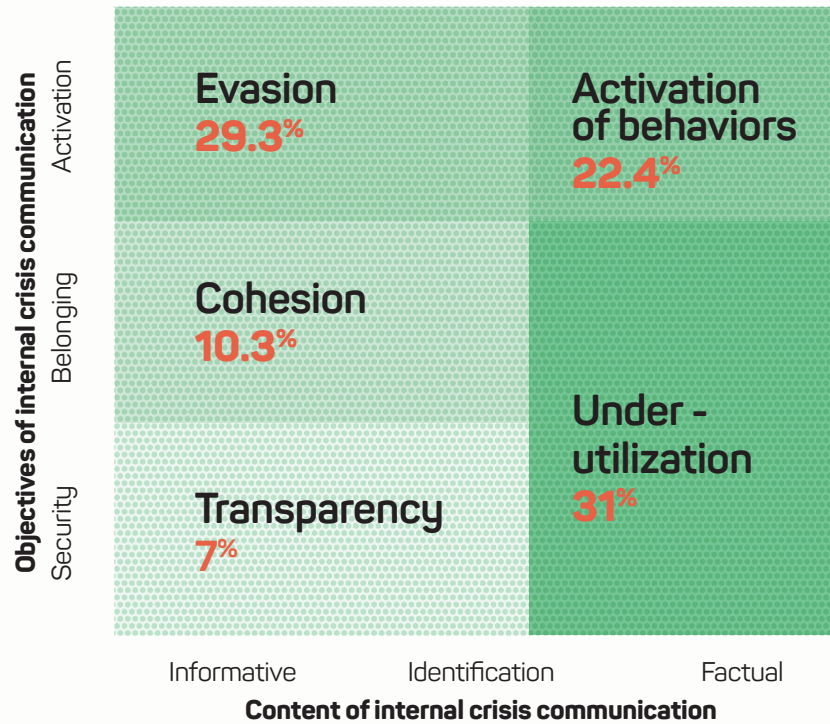
Global financial crisis in 2009 and internal crisis communication in Italy

Crisis communication has emerged as a hot topic after the global financial crisis that started in the second half of 2008 and continued throughout 2009 and beyond. A study of CERC (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015) surveyed Italian companies to examine internal crisis communication strategies and the characteristics of that communication. The study identified five **internal communication strategies**:

- **TRANSPARENCY**
combines security objectives with informative content and is adopted by organizations that want to release information to reduce the uncertainty that is linked to the scarcity of information itself
- **COHESION**
includes identification content, usually combined with transparent information, to increase the sense of belonging to the organization and thus create greater cohesiveness
- **ACTIVATION OF BEHAVIORS**
is the most complex and aims to stimulate proactive behaviors among employees through factual communication that is based on corrective actions or accommodative responses taken by the company and its management to address the crisis
- **UNDER-UTILIZATION**
leverages mostly on factual content related to the responses taken by the company to address the crisis, while not aiming at activating employees
- **EVASION**
aims at activating employee behaviors without providing factual information that are coherent with such an objective.

The main results show that companies adopted mostly Under-utilization and Evasion strategies, that leverage on types of content that are not coherent with communication objectives. These companies showed to have poorly used internal communication as a strategic lever to develop employee engagement.

Global financial crisis in 2009 and internal crisis communication in Italy



(Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015)





Which
research design?

Research design and method

Internal crisis communication strategies

Explorative analysis: interviews and focus groups with internal communication managers

10

interviews

2

focus groups

Survey with internal communication managers

116

questionnaires

Experience of employees

Survey with employees

126

questionnaires

How have Italian companies communicated with their employees during the crisis?

The research explored the following dimensions

- Kinds of content addressed at employees
- Tools used to communicate with employees
- Features that characterized internal communication during the pandemic
- Difficulties faced by internal communication managers
- Semantic areas covered through formal and informal communication in the perception of employees and internal communication managers
- The role played by top managers, middle managers and internal communication managers in the internal communication dynamics during the pandemic
- Features that will characterize internal communication after the pandemic, due to what companies experienced during the crisis

How has the working experience of employees been?

The research explored the following dimensions

- Perception of the support and internal communication coming from the organization during the crisis
- Impact of crisis management on the level of engagement compared to previous normality
- Role played by employee engagement drivers in crisis times compared to previous normality
- Perception of the remote working experience during the pandemic

Which have been the internal crisis communication strategies adopted by Italian companies?

Crisis communication strategies can vary between two poles: advocacy and accommodation (Coombs, 2015; Pang et al., 2009; Pang et al., 2010).

In this study, the CERC has declined these strategies in the case of internal crisis communication:

Pure advocacy: perched in safeguarding the interests of the affected company

Pure accommodation: aimed at building bridges with stakeholders through their protection. They are: creating a sense of security, sustaining a sense of belonging, activating employees' behavior as allies of the organization (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015).

Accommodative crisis communication strategies are preferable when dealing with the internal organization since employees are special stakeholders (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011):

- they hold a link of personal identification with their employers
- their economic stability depends on their company
- they have more acute reactions of insecurity, uncertainty and worry compared to other stakeholders.



Survey with IC managers

The respondents

Sample companies identikit



Size

Large companies prevail

48%

with more than 2,000 employees



Geographical scope

Largely multinationals

81%



Nationality

Mostly Italian-owned

61%



Property

Mostly private

58%

not listed



Industry

Service companies prevail

45%



Age

Mostly quite old

63%

are over 50 years of age



Survey with IC managers

The respondents

Respondents identikit



Education

Very significant presence of highly educated people



Gender

Largely women



Age

Mainly members of the X Generation



Organizational position

Good

86%

with at least a Bachelor degree

75%

women

50%

41-55 years old

38%

middle managers

35%

managers



Survey with employees

The respondents

Respondents identikit



Education

Significant presence of highly educated people

52%

with at least a Bachelor degree



Gender

Gender distribution perfectly in line with national overall data (58 men vs 42% women, 2020)

59%

men

41%

women



Age

Mainly members of X and Y Generations

56%

41-55 years old (X)

35%

27-40 years old (Y)



Organizational position

Prevalence of low and middle ranking positions

61%

employees

36%

middle manager



Job stability

Good

91%

permanent contract

94%

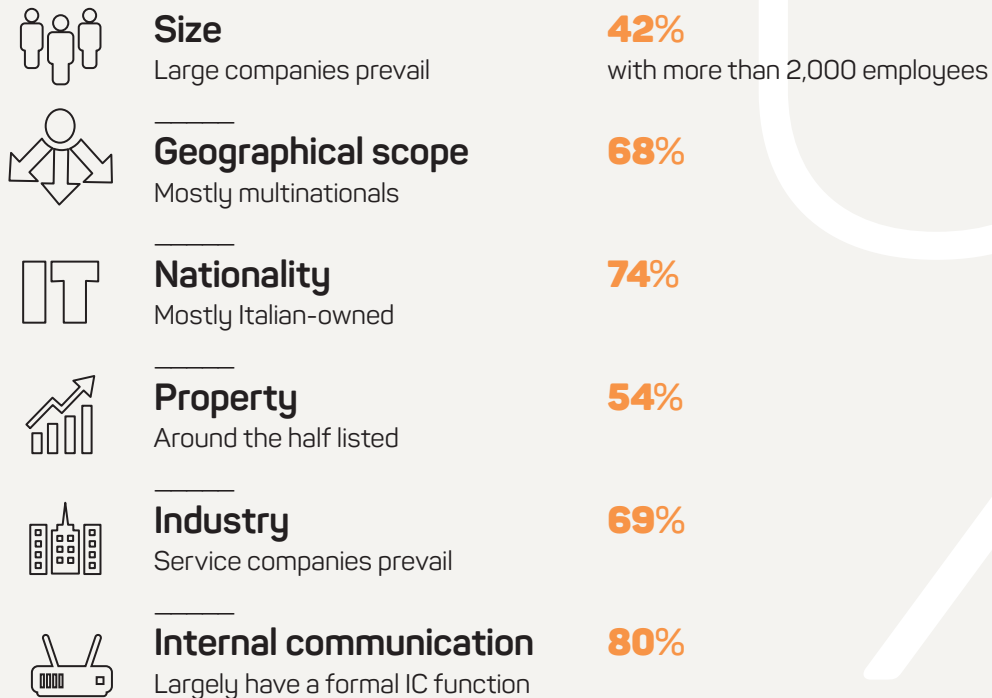
full time



Survey with employees

The respondents

Respondents' companies identikit





A decorative border composed of small, light gray plus signs (+) arranged in a grid pattern, framing the central text. The border is thicker on the left and right sides and thinner on the top and bottom.

Research findings

Research findings

How have Italian companies communicated with their employees?

- Content
- Tools
- IC features
- Difficulties
- Informal communication
- Top managers
- Middle managers
- IC managers
- Future

CAMEO
How have health organizations communicated with their employees?

CAMEO
How have institutions communicated in the public sphere?

How has the working experience of employees been?

- Employee engagement level
- Employee engagement components
- Employee relations approach
- Organizational justice approach
- Human resources management approach
- Initiatives

FOCUS

How have employees experienced remote working?

- Adoption
- Comparison to in presence work
- Enablers
- Benefits

Which internal crisis communication strategies have been adopted?

- Communication objectives
- Internal crisis communication strategies:
 - › Accommodation
 - › Advocacy
- Internal crisis communication approach

CAMEO

How should companies communicate with their employees for recovery and relaunch?

How have Italian companies communicated with their employees?

- Content
- Tools
- IC features
- Difficulties
- Informal communication
- Top managers
- Middle managers
- IC managers
- Future

Contents and messages

Interviews and focus groups

According to qualitative results, main contents delivered through internal communication can be grouped into the following categories, balancing pragmatic and psychological employee needs:

“Concrete” messages focused on enablement and value generation:

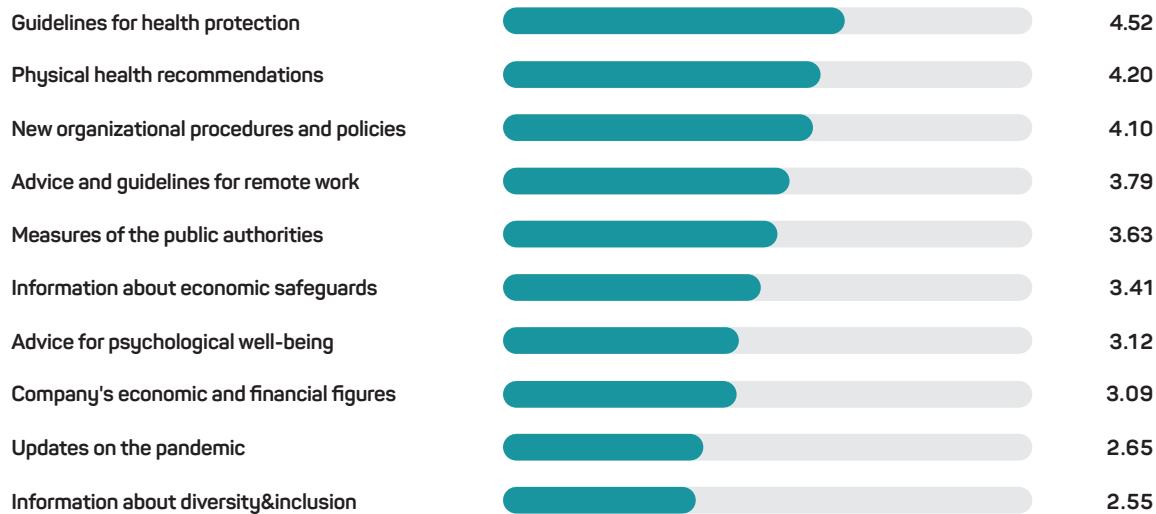
- Security measures, government decrees and their application
- Remote working rules and practices, use of technologies for remote collaboration and digital mindset acquisition for effective collaboration
- Corporate decisions and current business performance
- Corporate forecasts and plans for the future

“Soft” messages focused on motivation and empathy:

- Sense of security and solidity
- Proximity to employees and solidarity to their families too
- Gratitude to all employees for their extraordinary effort ensuring the continuity and survival of the organization, and in particular to those still working in physical offices, factories and front-office positions
- Personal care (physical health, work-life balance, stress management and resilience)
- Sense of unity and pride in the whole country

Which have been the most relevant contents of internal communication?

Survey: managers



(Means on a scale from 1 to 5)

The high relevance of messages related to **health** and to new **organizational procedures** and **advice for remote work** reflects the primary focus on safety and new working routines to be established. The low attention to content about **diversity and inclusion** could hide a weakness in the capacity of dealing with the work-life balancing of particular categories of employees, i.e., those with parenting needs aggravated by the lockdown condition: this topic could be more investigated in the future.

Tools

Interviews and focus groups

Qualitative results highlight a great variety of tools of internal communication and the particular drive towards innovating them:

- **External corporate website** with pages dedicated to employees
- **Intranet** with sections dedicated to the health emergency and its impact on employees and their work
- **Internal social media** (e.g., Yammer)
- **Emails, SMS, instant messaging, podcasting**
- **Video messages** from top management and leaders
- **Digital events** (e.g., meetings, town halls)
- **Digital newsletters**
- **Digital and paper house organs**
- **On site informational posters, signage systems, company TV**
- **Formal audits and informal dialogues** in dyads or small groups, including e.g., individual support offered through dedicated telephone numbers, mailboxes, Intranet spaces (e.g., #stayincontactwiththecompany)

A focus on digital tools

Interviews and focus groups

The organizations under study employed to an **unprecedented extent** a variety of digital tools that were either newly introduced or further leveraged, when already in use.

In most cases for the first time, **digital internal communication took precedence** over more traditional tools, due to so many employees working from home (in some cases up to 85% of the workforce).

Dedicated mobile apps were introduced also for employees working on site and not having access to computers during work hours.

The Intranet and internal social media were geared towards **internal sensemaking and storytelling**, where top-down and formal communications were accompanied with personal conversations, stories, photos and solidarity messages shared by employees themselves, becoming a truly “human digital workspace”.

External social media were used for **engaging stakeholders as well as giving resonance to employee storytelling**, through behind-the-scenes accounts of managers but also selfies, photographs and positive messages shared by employees themselves acting as internal ambassadors of the individual and organizational accomplishments.

Initiatives

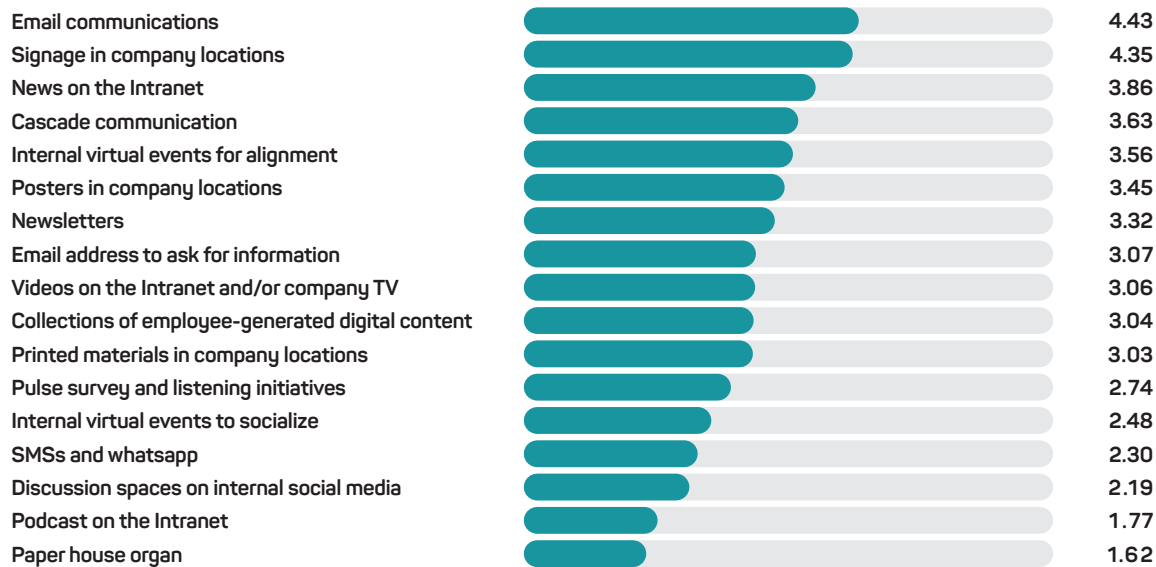
Interviews and focus groups

According to qualitative results, companies carried out a variety of internal communication initiatives, among which the following stand out:

- **Projects and internal contests** (e.g., “our remote-working stories”) aimed to collect and share photos, drawings, video, audio or text messages giving **voice and visibility to employees** and their personal experience
- **Team building and socialization events** (e.g., online happy hours and coffee meetings)
- **Coaching and training courses** for leaders and employees
- Efforts towards creating **convergence and synergy with external communication initiatives** through giving:
 - › **internal resonance** to:
 - external communication campaigns
 - community support corporate initiatives, including e.g., fundraising, product donations, internal sharing of communication material targeted to particular stakeholder categories (e.g., families).
 - › **external resonance** to:
 - messages and photos created and shared by employees on both corporate and personal external social media
 - contributions of employees to the organization’s and country’s emergency management (e.g., community service, volunteering, fundraising).

Which have been the most used tools of internal communication?

Survey: managers



(Means on a scale from 1 to 5)

The high usage of **digital tools** may be explained with the need to reach physically dispersed employees and to quickly provide employees with information during the acute phase of the crisis. At the same time, Italian companies intensively used **printed tools** in order to promote appropriate employee behaviors working in company offices, plants or stores.

Internal communication during the pandemic has been...

Keywords

Interviews and focus groups

- Transparent, specific, informative
 - Well-timed, constant
 - Supportive, collaborative, attentive to leveraging the "team spirit"
 - Empathic, emotional, human
 - Positive, optimistic
 - Engaging, bottom-up, user-generated, interactive
 - Less institutional, warmer, simpler, familiar
- Focused on sensemaking and storytelling
 - Well-thought-out not to hurt sensitivity and delicate situations
 - Innovative, creative
 - Strategic
 - Multi-channel, hybrid, integrated, synergic
 - Focused on listening and continuous monitoring
 - Ethical

Which have been the most important features of internal communication?

Survey: managers



(Means on a scale from 1 to 5)

During the Covid-19 crisis, internal communication has developed particular features. The most relevant characteristic was the **concreteness** and the attention to provide practical answers to employees, who suddenly had to manage situations that were completely new. **Timing** was also a crucial point, as it usually happens during crises: the effort made by internal communication managers and specialists to support their companies was continuous and the action was timely. Internal communication was also characterized by **authenticity** and transparency, as well as for its **ethical** approach. Another aspect that appeared to be key is the consistency with **external communication**.

Difficulties

Interviews and focus groups

Qualitative results revealed some key areas challenging internal communication efforts while managing:

- **Psychological aspects and emotions** of employees (e.g., stress, fear, uncertainty, difficulties in balancing work and family needs)
- **Dualisms and controversies** among employees created by the coexistence of different professional families:
 - › colleagues working from home vs. those more at risk because working in factories, logistics centres, front-office positions
 - › colleagues working vs. those not working because their services/work areas were temporarily shut down
 - › colleagues operating in more vs. less affected regions of the country
- **Multiple and alternative channels and contents:**
 - › to reach colleagues with no access to computers or other digital devices
 - › to reach colleagues working in offices spread across the country or abroad
 - › to enable listening attentive to each and every individual need
- **Information in a scenario characterized by great uncertainty:**
 - › risk of sending incoherent and discordant messages about the future scenario if contradicted by the development of events.

Which have been the main difficulties faced by internal communication?

Survey: managers

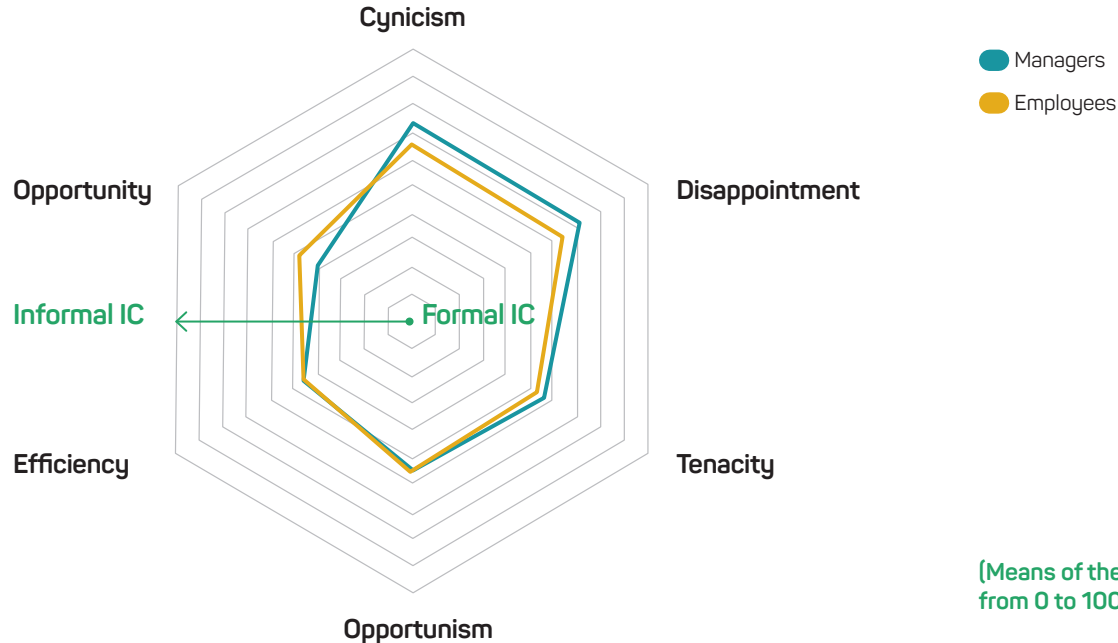


(Means on a scale from 1 to 5)

Communicating during the pandemic was challenging of course, but managers do not appear to have been particularly frightened, considering that the means obtained for all the items are always under 3.5 on a scale from 1 to 5. The main difficulties for internal communication managers were related to **uncertainty** of the information context and to the **complexity** of contents that had to be conveyed and adapted to the specific company reality. Another challenging area was the one connected to the need to manage new **remote ways of collaboration** and to deal with people's **strong emotions**, such as fear and sadness.

Which semantic areas have prevailed in formal and informal internal communication?

Managers versus Employees



During crises, informal communication is very relevant for sensemaking processes, and can become an issue when it strays from formal internal communications. According to both employees and managers, words in the negative semantic areas of **cynicism** (e.g., perplexity, anger, irritation), **disappointment** (e.g., mistrust, demotivation, suffering) and **opportunism** (e.g., a ploy to cut) have been common in informal communication, differently from the words in the positive areas of **efficiency** (e.g., better organization thanks to collaboration technologies) and **opportunity** (e.g., change, more attention to health). Nonetheless, employees and managers agreed that the positive words in the area of **tenacity** (e.g., engagement, responsibility, "we'll make it") have been quite used in informal communication too.

Which have been the most important communication activities of the top management?

Survey: managers



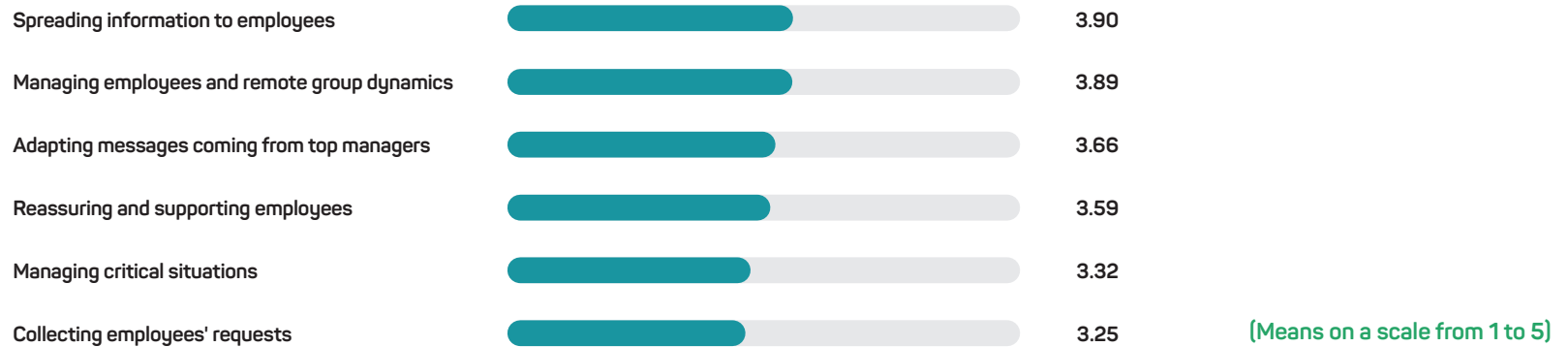
(Means on a scale from 1 to 5)

Internal communication during crises involves the joint action of top managers, middle managers and internal communication managers, since all organizational actors are involved in mutual communicative processes aimed at making sense of the situation.

During the Covid-19 crisis, top managers communicated with the primary focus of **expressing gratitude** to employees for their contribution and with the aim of reinforcing messages about **corporate values** and identity.

Which have been the most important communication activities of middle managers?

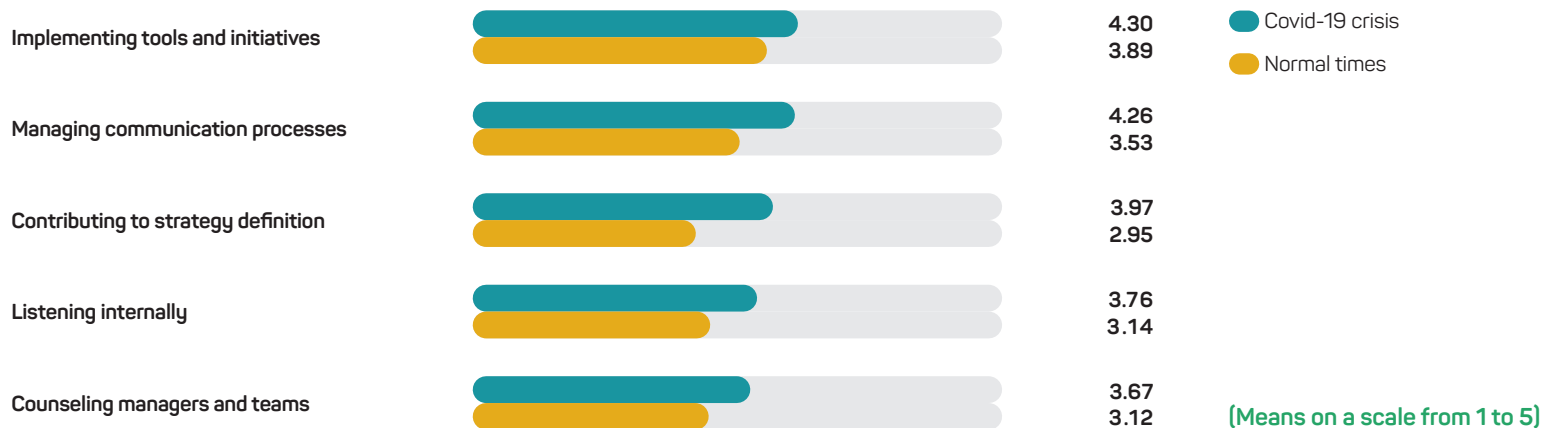
Survey: managers



During the Covid-19 crisis, middle managers' communicative effort was mainly focused on **spreading information** to employees and on **managing employees** and remote working dynamics.

Which have been the most important activities of the internal communication manager?

Survey: managers
Covid-19 crisis 2020 versus Normal times 2019



The role played by internal communication managers during the Covid-19 crisis resulted to be more valuable and strategic than in normal times, in comparison to the outcomes of a study conducted in the pre-crisis phase (Mazzei & Quarantino, 2019). In particular, they were highly involved in implementing tools and initiatives and in managing communication processes. However, compared to the pre-crisis phase, internal communication managers perceive that the highest increase in their effort especially regards the contribution they gave to the **definition of company strategies**, i.e. the role they played as **Strategists**.

How internal communication will become following the emergency?

Survey: managers



(Means on a scale from 1 to 5)

According to managers, some features characterizing internal communication during the Covid-19 crisis will remain even after it. First of all, a reinforced focus on digital communication to accompany and enhance the relational one. In perspective, two inheritances appear to be key: the recognition of the contribution that internal communication can give to **external communication** and the stronger **convergence** among the two, being the boundaries between internal and external communication destined to dissolve in a definitive way; and the **enhanced relevance** of internal communication for **future corporate strategies**, supported by the awareness of the essential contribution made by internal communication to the management of the Covid-19 crisis.



CAMEO

**How have healthcare organizations communicated
with their employees?**

How have healthcare organizations communicated with their employees?

Interview with Walter Bruno, Communication Director at Humanitas Research Hospital, a private hospital accredited with the National Health System highly specialized in teaching and research, located in the Lombardy region.

“ Looking at the Covid-19 emergency from your professional point of view, which were the unique challenges posed to hospitals?

The hospital is a unique organization in normal times and even more in times of a pandemic, because being on the front means implementing actions under **incredible pressure, which is that of the life and health of people.**

70% of employees are medical staff who had to experience a **swirling transformation** of their mentality, skills and routines, converted towards building an “infectious culture”, while also the hospital was transfigured in terms of reorganization of spaces and their intended uses.

The bar was raised even higher by keeping Humanitas as one of the hospitals which continued treating cancer in Lombardy during the first Covid wave. That meant a strict division of paths for Covid and non-Covid patients.

Which were the objectives and which was the role of internal communicators in Humanitas?

The objectives have been to **inform, train and protect** employees

with technical and operational information, but also to **thank, celebrate and engage** them all the way through.

Regarding the role of internal communicators, we at the Communication Department have always been here, 7 days a week. The communicator is a witness, operating in the trenches since you have to **breathe the field and be an interpreter.**

In your hospital, how did you manage the communication with medical staff and other employees?

We used **online meetings, newsletters, Intranet, videos**, for instance on how to put on facial masks or how to manage fear transforming it into energy. A tool that has become unexpectedly highly appreciated was the **daily bulletin of the Medical Director** about what had happened and what was coming next.

How was the communication with patients and their families dealt with at Humanitas?

Doctors had to find new ways to communicate with patients in intensive care units, for instance **handmade signage**. As the hospital was inaccessible to relatives and friends for the first time in histo-

ry, we had to invent **new relationship channels to fill a void**, thanks to doctors, nurses, trained volunteers, that for instance allowed grandparents to talk to their grandchildren through tablets.

How did Humanitas communicate with other stakeholders and the media?

We implemented **institutional and educational storytelling on social media**. For example, we used **stories on Spotify** shared by doctors and nurses for the public at large but also for employees in remote working: a way to leave a trace, an emotional relief valve, to tell the story of the accomplishments of medical staff and to channel spontaneous communication to the outside world and the media.

We also made use of **articles on LinkedIn**, to tell the behind the scenes of what had happened in the weeks of acute emergency, in order to pinpoint the key landmarks of internal communication and give it a shape through words and voice.

Finally, we used **magazines, letters to newspapers by medical staff, photoshoots** by Maki Galimberti, reporting the scars on the epic faces of those - the medical staff - who have sacrificed and overturned their lives to deal with the emergency.

In your opinion, which have been the emerging characteristics of internal communication during the pandemic?

As an observer in this time of unprecedented crisis, it seems to me that internal communication has been **hybrid and synergic with external communication**: the boundaries between internal and external communication definitively fall.

It has been **innovative and creative**: in conditions where you cannot turn to paper, you have to invent completely new ways, a new internal communication approach completely different from routine that follows necessity and carries out experiments. At the same time, internal communication has been **real, rich, profound, useful, scrupulous, emotional, pervasive**: a communication right inside the crisis to give words, voice, help.

All in all, I can conclude saying that I believe that in 25 years of working in communication, I have now experienced the highest point of the expression of the usefulness of internal communication.







CAMEO

**How have institutions communicated
in the public sphere?**

How have institutions communicated in the public sphere?

Interview with Alessandro Lovari, Assistant Professor in Sociology of Cultural and Communicative processes at University of Cagliari, Italy, and Member of CERC Scientific Committee. His research focuses on public sector communication, public relations and health communication.

The Covid-19 pandemic showed a new centrality for public sector organizations. What is your opinion about how Italian public institutions managed their communications?

Public institutions were put under **an unexpected pressure** by the **uncertainty** of the situation, the **quick spread of the virus**, and the development of the so called **infodemic**, a mix of facts, fears, and rumors often fueled by the media spectacularization.

Italy was the first Western country to be impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and institutions were **obliged to reshape their communication** to counteract the severe situation. One year after, it is still difficult to evaluate how Italian public institutions communicate. Several studies investigated the Italian Government, the Ministry of Health, Regions and health authorities.

The plurality and diversity of public institutions, and their communication biographies, make it difficult to assess efforts and strategies. The main trajectories that emerged show **a balance with lights and shade**.

Scholars reported how institutions showed a **communication resilience** to face the emergency, and a **strategic use of digital channels**, especially social media and instant messaging tools.

These actions proved **useful in facing the acute phase** of the crisis, raising the **visibility** of official sources and aiming at restoring **credibility** by reconnecting with citizens and at **decreasing the fake news impact**.

We can also identify **criticalities**: the cacophony of institutional voices, the lack of coordination between institutions acting in the same areas, the interference of politics (e.g., before the lockdown and the vaccination campaign), the lack of training in crisis communication of many communicators.

What was the most innovative aspect of public institutions' communication management?

The pandemic highlighted the **growing role of digital platforms** for public sector organizations. Indeed, most institutions understood the **importance to strategically use social media platforms** to communicate with citizens and the media regarding the measures to avoid the contagion, the updates regarding the Covid-19 cases, the delivery of public services, as well as to inform them about vaccinations.

Social media started to be in the spotlight because of the **quick**

diffusion of disinformation and the **need to disseminate accurate information** to face infodemic and to counteract the lack of trust and credibility in institutions.

All these aspects were positive, and they impacted in Italians' daily activities. But we need to remember that **digital platforms are not neutral**, and they can be **enablers of visibility** as well as **factors for inequality**, capable of increasing differences also from a public sector communication perspective.

What can be learnt from this crisis?

An important part of examining a crisis is learning how to improve for the next one. Public institutions **should revise preparedness plans** for future pandemics. They should **improve the quality** of their communication also integrating citizens' voices and using a multichannel approach. Institutions should invest in strategic **listening**, adopting a **two-way communication approach** allowing for a less asymmetrical relationship that characterized public sector communication in Italy.



How have Italian companies communicated with their employees?

During the Covid-19 pandemic, **content** and messages of internal communication were mainly focused on **health** and new **organizational procedures** and conveyed mainly through **digital** but also **printed tools**.

Internal communication stood out for **concreteness, timeliness, authenticity and consistency** with external communication, while challenged by the **uncertainty** and complexity of the informative context.

Informal communication was characterized by words in negative semantic areas, but words in the **positive semantic area of tenacity** were also commonly used.

Top managers communicated especially in order **to express gratitude** to employees, while middle managers were more focused on **spreading information** to them.

Internal communication managers increased their effort in every aspect of their job role, especially in contributing to the definition of **corporate strategies**.

After the pandemic, internal communication will be **more digital, more convergent** with external communication and **more relevant** for corporate strategies.

- **Content**

health and new organizational procedures

- **Tools**

digital but also printed tools

- **IC features**

concreteness, timing, authenticity, consistency with external communication

- **Difficulties**

uncertainty and complexity of information

- **Informal communication**

positive words in the semantic area of tenacity

- **Top managers**

focus on expressing gratitude to employees

- **Middle managers**

focus on spreading information to employees

- **IC managers**

higher effort in all the roles, especially that of Strategist

- **Future**

convergence with external communication, and relevance for corporate strategies

RECAP

How has the working experience of employees been?

- Employee engagement level
- Employee engagement components
- Employee relations approach
- Organizational justice approach
- Human resources management approach
- Initiatives

Defining engagement and its components

Today, the critical role played by employee engagement for **competitive advantage** is widely recognized. In particular, the literature focuses on return on assets, profitability, market value, customer satisfaction, attitudinal, behavioral and performance related outcomes, employee task and extra-role performance, brand building, company advocacy, innovation, stakeholder relationships, and crisis prevention and management. Furthermore, engagement positively affects employee retention, job crafting and the extent to which employees voice their ideas, suggestions and concerns.

In order to deeply understand employee engagement, three **preliminary considerations** are crucial. First, employee engagement includes three components: cognitive (or absorption); emotional (or dedication); and behavioral (or vigor). Second, employee engagement is the final stage of a dynamic process bringing employees with a positive dispositional trait to a psychological state of commitment, up to an attitudinal and behavioral intention to behave in favor of the organization. Third, the employee engagement construct is a behavioral one: it exists when the emotional and cognitive links with the organization are translated into concrete behaviors and actions.

In conclusion, employee engagement refers to a **personal trait** expressing a disposition toward enthusiasm that, interacting with **situational factors**, determines a persistent psychological state of cognitive **absorption** in one's work, emotional **dedication** and **vigor**, that is a physical-energetic component.

Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly, and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work.

Dedication is characterized by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge.

Vigor is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and the persistence also in the face of difficulties.

(Mazzei, 2018)

Comparing Covid-19 crisis (2020) and Normal times (2017)

Aims, methodology and sampling

This research stream aimed at investigating which were the perceptions of employees about their organizational experience and engagement during the Covid-19 emergency. On the one hand, comparing the data to the ones collected through a **similar survey in 2017** (Mazzei et al., 2018; Mazzei et al., 2019), on the other including **new specific topics** strictly related to the Covid-19 emergency.

It investigates three main dimensions:

1. **level of engagement** and its underlying drivers
2. **initiatives** for supporting employees during the Covid-19 crisis
3. **remote working** experience.

The methodology consisted of a survey based on the submission of a structured questionnaire. As far as the first area of investigation is concerned, the questions were drawn from the questionnaire used in 2017. The second and third areas were developed from scratch in order to capture specific phenomena generated by the pandemic.

The 2020 survey involved a convenience sample, like the survey conducted in 2017. However, it is not possible to consider the 2020 study a pure longitudinal one, given that the two samples included different respondents.

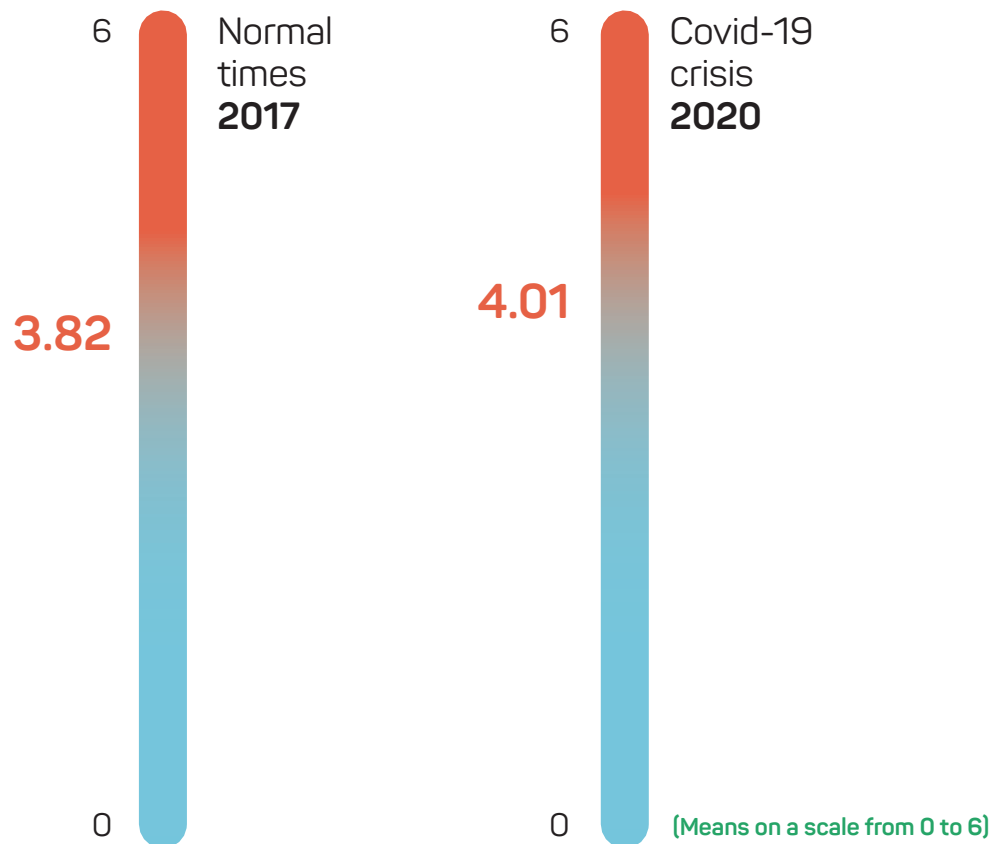
In the following pages, the main results emerging from the 2020 survey are presented and, when the data are available and significant, a comparison is made with the evidence coming from the 2017 survey: **crisis times vs. normal times**.

Level of employee engagement

Survey: employees

Covid-19 crisis 2020 versus Normal times 2017

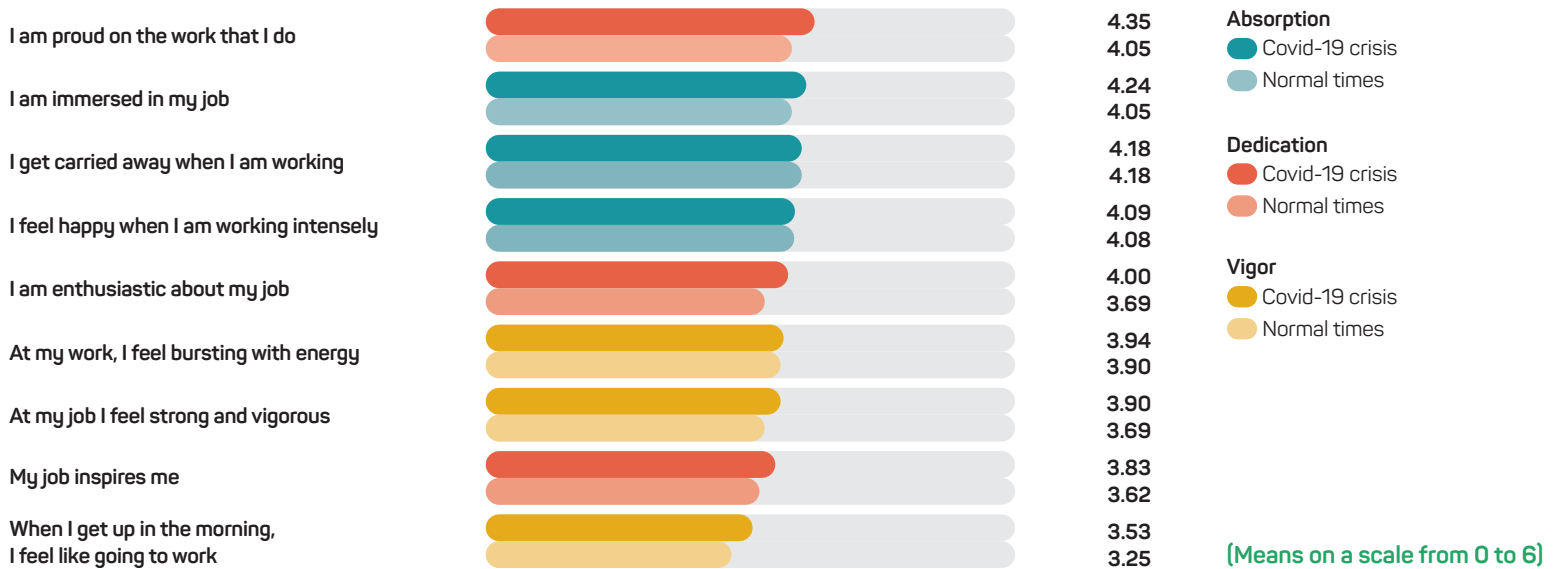
The level of employee engagement during the **pandemic** scored **4.01**, showing a slight increase in comparison with the data collected in **normal times** (**3.82**). This can be probably explained considering that data were collected across the summer and the fall of 2020, when in Italy the second wave was still to fully break out. In that specific moment, pride, cohesion and motivation for having resisted and overcome the first pandemic shock was very likely the most widespread feeling among companies and their employees. For many people, struggling through the initial phase of the crisis meant **living their job as a superior mission**.



Employee engagement Components

Survey: employees

Covid-19 crisis 2020 versus Normal times 2017



Breaking down employee engagement into its three components of **cognitive absorption, emotional dedication, and vigor**, it clearly emerges that all of them, compared to 2017, **result strengthened**. The increase for two items related to dedication is particularly relevant: **enthusiasm and proudness for their job**. As confirmed by many qualitative data, during the pandemic many people perceived what they were doing everyday in their workplace (physical or virtual) as a way to concretely contribute to the collective effort of overcoming of the crisis.

The engagement has been measured through the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Managerial approaches to sustain employee engagement

Employee relations
Approach
Inclusive vs. Hierarchical

Organizational justice
Approach
Fair vs. Unfair

Human resources management
Approach
Developmental vs. Accommodative

In our research model, the managerial approaches play a key role in determining engaging or disengaging organizational contexts. **These approaches are mostly in the hands of managers.**

The approach to **employee relations** can be inclusive or hierarchical. It is inclusive when based on adopting systems that support the free expression of employee voice, consultation with employees, solicitation of informal feedback, information sharing and sensemaking, involvement of employees in decision-making processes.

The approach to **organizational justice** can be fair or unfair. It depends on the perceived fairness and consistency of procedures such as performance appraisal, promotions and salary increases, disciplinary measures and terminations.

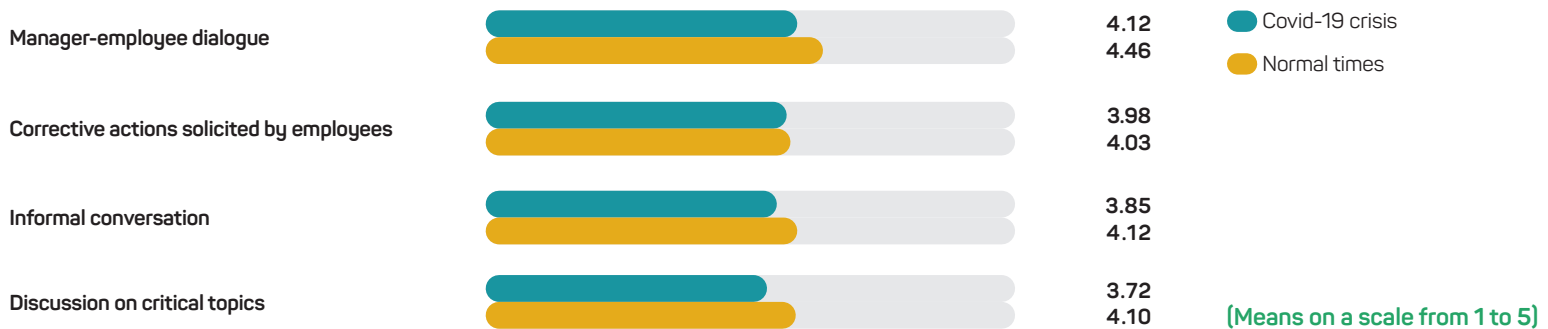
The approach to **human resources management** can be developmental or accommodative. It is developmental when aimed at increasing the ability and motivation of employees to achieve job performance, supporting their needs for personal and professional growth through training, coaching and initiatives on welfare, well-being and diversity (Mazzei, Butera, & Quarantino, 2019).

Employee relations approach

Relevance of managerial practices

Survey: employees

Covid-19 crisis 2020 *versus* Normal times 2017



In order to explore the employee relations approach of the companies of our respondents, some key practices were considered.

Compared to normal times, all the items decrease, showing that partial or total **reduction of interaction in presence** affected overall the quality of the relationship (manager-employee dialogue), especially in terms of **discussion on critical topics (0.38 gap)**.

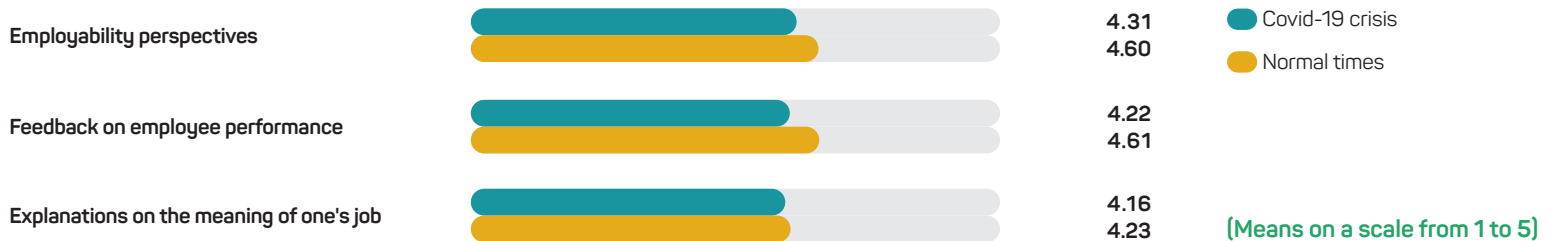
Focusing on the Covid-19 crisis, it is interesting that **corrective actions solicited by employees** is the only item **increasing its ranking** compared to the others (from the fourth position to the second): very likely in these hard times the **bottom-up input resulted crucial** to manage uncertainty and ambiguity.

Employee relations approach

Relevance of specific topics in manager-employee communication

Survey: employees

Covid-19 crisis 2020 *versus* Normal times 2017



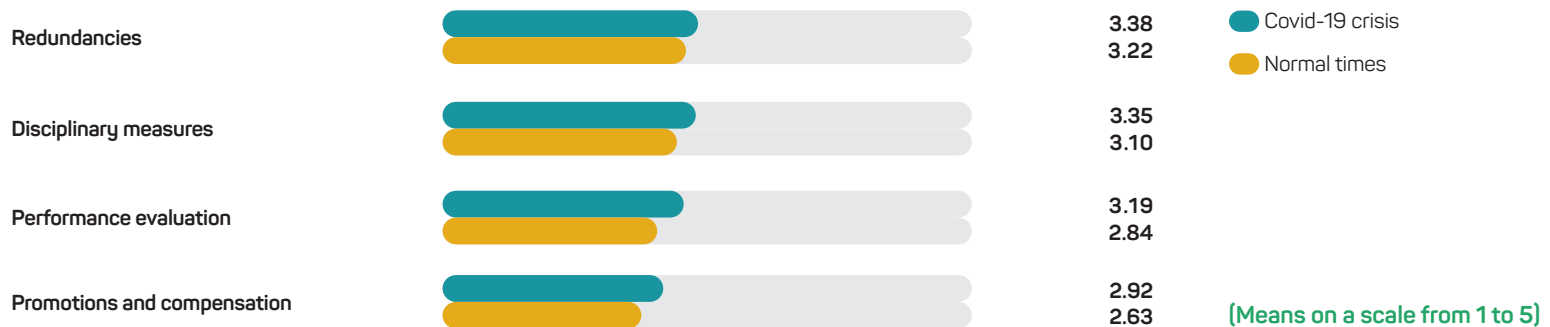
According to scientific literature, the items considered in this chart represent specific content of manager-employee communication playing a crucial role in generating employee engagement. Compared to normal times, an overall reduction of all the items is clear and, as for the managerial practices, it can be explained by the limited physical interaction determined by the emergency. Even though, as a matter of fact **the scores remain rather high (>4)**. Besides, while the drop is quite significant concerning (informal) feedback on performance and future perspectives, it is almost irrelevant in terms of **explanations on the meaning of one's job**: it was **extremely clear for everyone why they were working** and what they were fighting for.

Organizational justice approach

Fairness and consistency of procedures

Survey: employees

Covid-19 crisis 2020 *versus* Normal times 2017



The organizational justice approach is the only dimension of our theoretical model showing **an increase of all the considered items compared to normal times**. In particular, regarding performance evaluation and promotions & compensation (both +0.35).

Very likely this is the effect of a different organizational climate during the pandemic when, as many scientific contributions underline, **transparency and authenticity in communication** from managers became one of the key assets for effectively **performing their leadership role** in what can be quite rightly considered '**war times**'. One of the challenges for the future consists in translating some traits and behaviors of this emergency leadership into normal times.

Human resources management approach

Relevance of HRM practices

Survey: employees

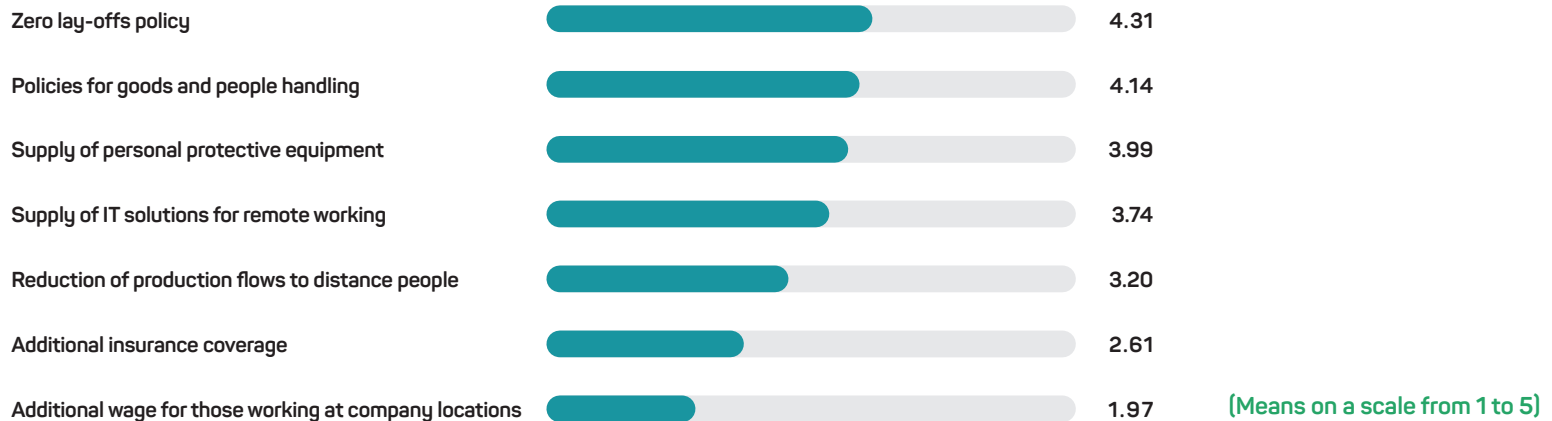
Covid-19 crisis 2020 versus Normal times 2017



The analysis of the third managerial approach of the adopted employee engagement model, was based on a wide range of typical HRM practices. **Compared to normal times, all the items decrease**, except for **well-being programs** (also moving from 8th position to 4th in the ranking) which were extremely important in supporting the new way of working required from employees. Both for people in presence and in remote working, it became a crucial matter **to take care of their physical and psychological well-being**. Conversely, the most significant drop affected individual coaching and mentoring, which were probably very hard to be effectively conducted in an organizational setting where interactions were very limited.

What initiatives have companies activated to support employees in relation to the Covid-19 crisis?

Survey: employees



Here some data on the specific initiatives developed to support employees during Covid-19 pandemic are presented. Besides the zero lay-offs policy that was somehow imposed by the national law, organizations put their best efforts in defining **clear protocols for people and goods mobility** and in providing **personal safety devices**.

How has the working experience of employees been?

First, it is worth noticing that the level of **engagement** by employees during the pandemic **slightly increased** in comparison to normal times. Probably because proudness and motivation in struggling through the crisis meant for many people to see their job as a superior mission: contributing to the collective effort of overcoming the health and economic emergency.

Focusing on the **engagement components**, i.e., absorption, dedication and vigor, it emerges that **all of them result strengthened** compared to the data collected in 2017, especially specific items related to **dedication**: enthusiasm and proudness for one's job.

Regarding the managerial approaches enabling an engaging organizational context, the **organizational justice approach** is the only one showing a clear increase of all the considered items,

compared to normal times. This is likely due to the development of a different organizational climate during the pandemic when transparency and authenticity in communication from managers played a significant role.

Finally, employees appreciated the **organizational efforts** in defining clear protocols for people and goods mobility and in providing personal safety devices, as a sign of attention and care.

In short, the pressure coming from the Covid-19 crisis taught companies and managers some interesting lessons about how to foster engagement of their employees. Hopefully, traits and behaviors of this emergency leadership will be translated into normal times, as well.

- **Employee engagement level**

increased compared to normal times

- **Employee engagement components**

dedication especially strengthened

- **Employee relations approach**

affected by the reduction of interactions

- **Organizational justice approach**

employee perception got better

- **Human resources management approach**

relevance of well-being programs increased

- **Initiatives**

appreciation of safety measures

RECAP

FOCUS

How have employees experienced remote working?

- Adoption
- Comparison to in presence work
- Enablers
- Benefits



Why a focus on remote working?

Remote working has been **one of the most relevant phenomena** characterizing the organizational landscape during the pandemic. The number of employees involved in Italy literally boomed from around 600,000 to almost 7 million, and companies adopting it rose from 15% to 77% (*Osservatori Digital Innovation, 2020*). And for more than 5 million employees there is a high probability of maintaining remote working to some extent even after the pandemic is over.

The present **debate on the impact of remote working** on organizations and people, extremely wide and articulated, is running the risk of polarizing around two extreme positions: something to be removed as soon as possible, like the CEO of Goldman Sachs recently affirmed, or the new ruling normality, as believed in Spotify with the mantra “work from anywhere”.

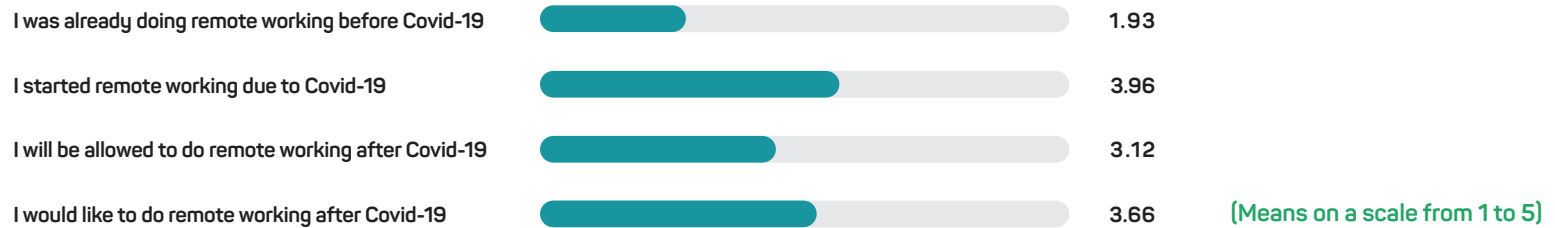
Through CERC explorations, we are learning that many organizations today are thinking about a **third way**, based on combining the pluses of the old way of working in presence and the benefits that were discovered thanks to the massive experience of remote working during the last year. So, a new way of working and the idea of a “**hybrid workplace**” are emerging.

The data presented in this section aim at contributing to the current debate and provide organizations with some deeper knowledge in order to define their future development.

The remote working adoption

An overview

Survey: employees

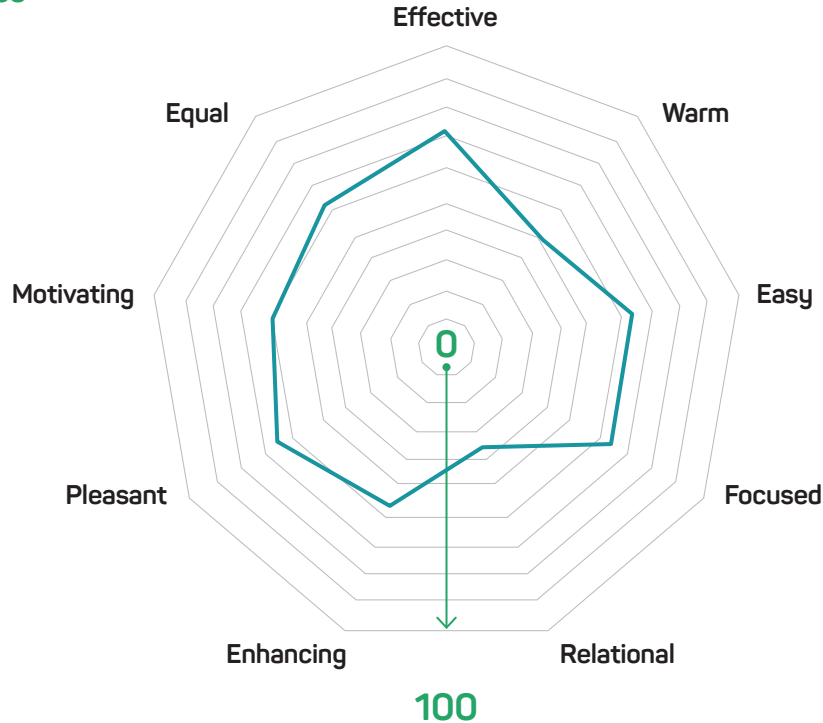


Data confirm that the diffusion of remote working was strongly accelerated by the pandemic, forcing somehow many employees into a totally new working experience. The idea of **continuing with remote working scores 3.66**, indicating that people are attracted by this perspective, but very likely **at certain conditions and with some corrective actions**.

Remote working *versus* in presence work

A comparison

Survey: employees



(Means on a scale from 0 to 100)

When compared to in presence work, remote working is perceived as effective (72 on a scale from 0 to 100), focused and easy (both 64). It seems that it allows better time management during meetings and helps employees to remain focused on topics. The outcomes are a potentially **greater effectiveness**. However, people perceived it as not warm (49) and relational (36), showing that they **miss the social dimension of the work experience** very much.

Remote working Enablers

Survey: employees

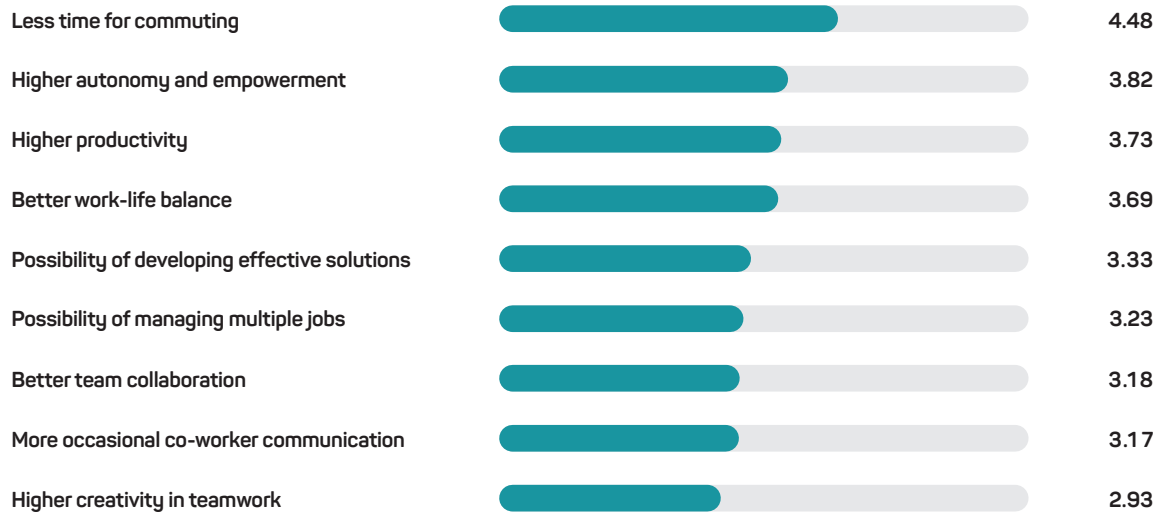


(Means on a scale from 1 to 5)

Data clearly show that the key issue was about **technology**, in terms of connection and devices, with many companies that had to quickly fill a consistent gap. At the same time, also some **soft skills** played a significant role in making remote working smooth: **time management**, essential for work-life balance as well, and **trust in the team**, critical for compensating the impossibility of direct control on colleagues. Especially for people managers, this last point represented a key challenge.

Remote working Benefits

Survey: employees



(Means on a scale from 1 to 5)

The benefits generated are overall contributing to making the **work experience more sustainable**: saving commuting time, autonomy and empowerment. If also a gain in **productivity** is registered, at the same time companies should pay great attention to some **limits related to remote working** as **team collaboration, informal communication and creativity**, given their relevant impact on the competitive advantage.

How have employees experienced remote working?

Overall, the experience employees have had of remote working during the pandemic is **mainly positive**, and the majority of them would like to continue with it, to some extent, even after the Covid-19 emergency will be over.

The main reasons behind this perception is that the **work experience** has become **more sustainable**, avoiding a huge waste of time commuting, getting a better W&L balance and experiencing higher levels of empowerment and autonomy.

At the same time, remote working showed some **significant limitations** affecting the everyday routine of many employees: difficulties in cooperating, rarefaction of occasional meetings and communications on which most of the social dimension of work is based and decrease of creative processes inside teams.

Finally, some **enablers of remote working** did emerge. On the hard side, the availability of good technologies, both infrastructures and devices; on the soft side, the presence of a managerial style able to develop trust and cohesion inside the team.

Looking to the future, the critical issue consists in defining **a new balance between in presence and remote working**. The new way of working will probably be **hybrid**, virtuously mixing the physical and digital experience and emphasizing the benefits of both. And some **challenges** are already clear **for Human resources and Internal communication specialists**: How to ensure innovation and creativity? How to develop cultural cohesion? How to effectively socialize newcomers? How to preserve the social and emotional side of the work experience? How to protect people from isolation and burn-out? How to ensure exchange and sharing of tacit knowledge?

- **Adoption**

employees wish to continue remote working in normal times

- **Comparison to in presence work**

greater effectiveness, lower relational efficacy

- **Enablers**

technology is key as well as soft skills

- **Benefits**

more sustainable work experience, but less creativity and cooperation

RECAP

Which internal crisis communication strategies have been adopted?

- Communication objectives
- Internal crisis communication strategies:
 - › Accommodation
 - › Advocacy
- Internal crisis communication approach

Communication objectives

Interviews and focus groups

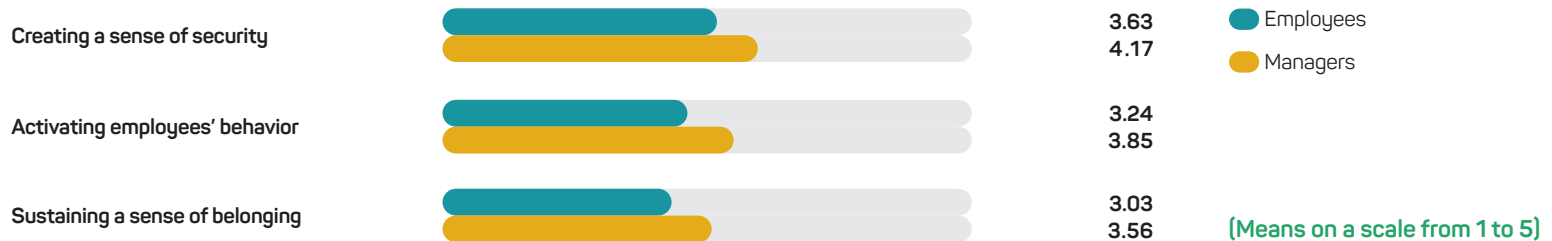
Qualitative results revealed three closely intertwined internal communication objectives:

- **Keeping employees constantly informed** offering guidance on business decisions and hands-on training (e.g., on safety measures, remote working practices)
- **Reassuring employees** through empathic and emotional communication messages meant to reduce physical and psychological distances and build a larger sense of unity and pride in the country and its resilient capacities
- **Listening to the needs and expectations of employees** through two-way communications, also aimed at detecting what had worked and what needed to be further improved.

Accommodation

Internal crisis communication strategies

Employees *versus* Managers



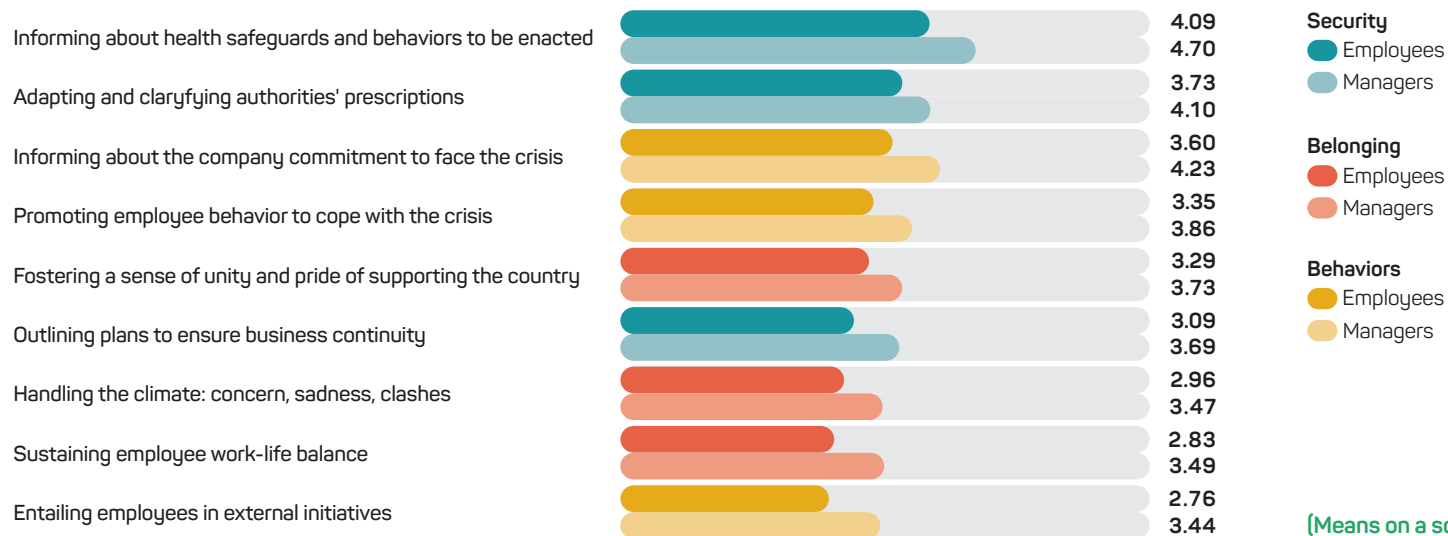
According to both managers and employees, companies have pursued mostly the accommodative strategies of **security** and **behavior**. A lower focus has been reported regarding the strategy of **belonging**.

Overall, when accommodative strategies are concerned, managers perceive a higher company effort than employees: a meaningful **misalignment**.

Accommodation

Internal crisis communication strategies

Employees *versus* Managers



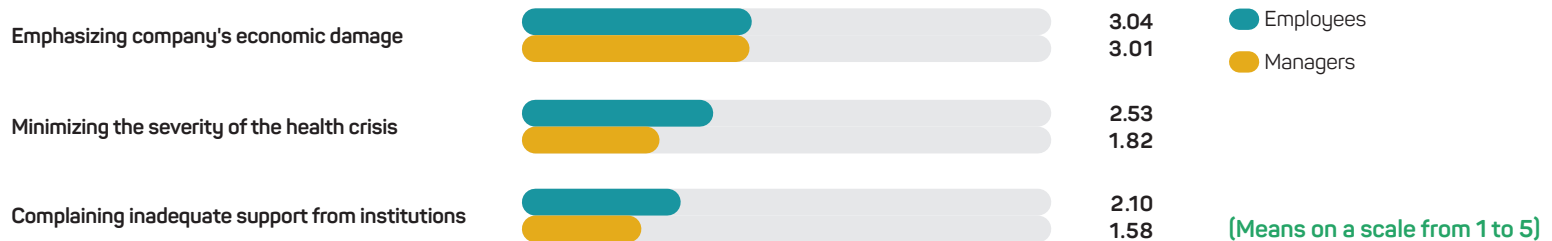
(Means on a scale from 1 to 5)

For each item of the accommodative strategies, the perception of managers is higher than the one of employees. Managers claim to do better in considering employees' concerns than the latter do. It is necessary to pay attention to this kind of **misalignment**.

Advocacy

Internal crisis communication strategies

Employees *versus* Managers



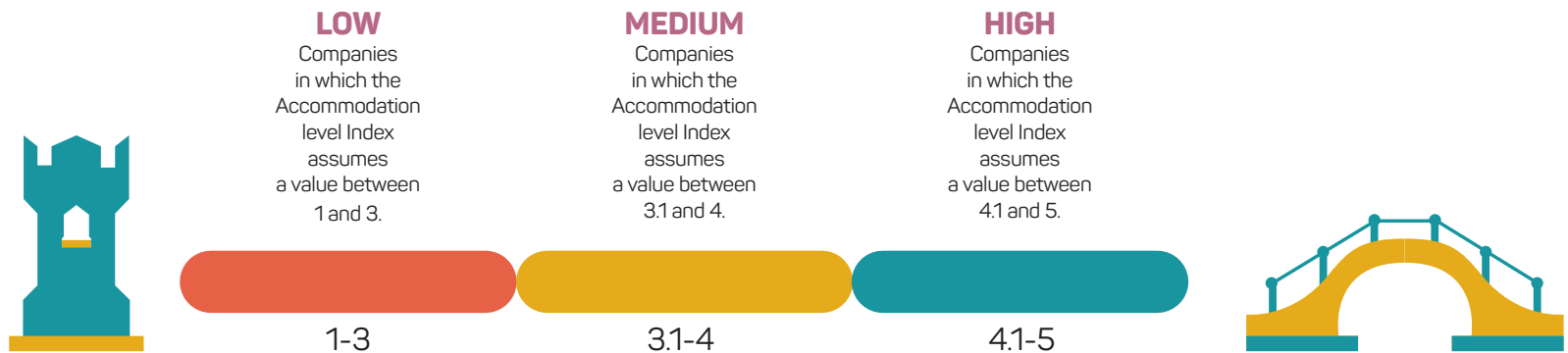
When trying to advocate the company interests, according to both managers and employees, internal communication referred mostly to the company's need of dealing with the **economic damage** caused by the pandemic. A divergent perception emerges between managers and employees regarding other advocacy motives that were used in internal communication, specifically the minimization of the severity of the health crisis and the complaint about the inadequate support from institutions. Again, a **misalignment** to be put under the spotlight.

To what extent have companies adopted accommodating internal crisis communication strategies?

Survey: managers

In order to measure the extent to which companies adopted **accommodating** internal crisis communication strategies, we calculated the “**Accommodation level of Internal Crisis Communication**” Index.

The index was calculated on a 1-5 scale. Overall, the sample recorded an index value of **3.86**. Calculating this index for each company included in the sample, organizations were grouped into three clusters.



Accommodation level of internal crisis communication Index

To what extent have companies adopted accommodating internal crisis communication strategies?

Survey: managers



Accommodation level of internal crisis communication Index

The three clusters show that overall companies pursued a high level of accommodation in their internal communication strategies.

Which internal crisis communication strategies have been adopted?

During the Covid-19 pandemic, internal communication managers had three clear **objectives** in mind: keeping employees constantly **informed** and **reassured** while **listening** to their needs and expectations.

Considering the internal crisis communication strategies devoted to **accommodation**, these were aimed mainly at supporting the employees' feeling of **security** and at activating them as allies of the organization to deal with the emergency, promoting **behaviors** coherent with the company plans to address and overcome it. Companies were also keen to sustain employees' sense of **belonging**, counteracting the forced distance between employees.

Companies resorted to **advocacy** too, especially referring to the need of dealing with the **economic damage** caused by the pandemic.

However, **overall the approach adopted** by Italian companies to internal crisis communication was mainly revolved to **accommodation**, preserving the relationship with the special internal stakeholders.

- **Communication objectives**
informing, reassuring, listening
- **Internal crisis communication strategies, accommodation**
focused on security, behaviors and belonging

- **Internal crisis communication strategies, advocacy**
referred to dealing with the economic damage
- **Internal crisis communication approach**
mainly revolved to accommodation

RECAP





CAMEO

**How should companies communicate with their employees
for recovery and relaunch?**

How should companies communicate with their employees for recovery and relaunch?

Interview with Andrea Notarnicola, cultural change management consultant and partner of Newton. In 2019 he authored the book “L’impresa spezzata” (The broken enterprise), focused on the recovery phase after a crisis.

“**Considering the Covid-19 crisis, what will be the main communication challenges for companies in the recovery and relaunch phase?**”

During this crisis, communication helped disrupted and dispersed **workforces** feel **connected** and **reassured**. In the recovery and relaunch phase it will be still important to be connected with people and to work on morale by encouraging reflection in order to reprocess the experience. Companies will have to **involve employees in redesigning** the organization. The solution for company recovery will come from the hard work of the employees who decide to stay; from the commitment of those who take on critical roles in a company whose business profile can be uncertain; and from the ideas of the community that helps relaunch it. Finally in the **hybrid environment** social interactions are a worry. We’ve lost accidental meetings over a cup of coffee, bumping into each other in the corridor. We need new ideas to recreate these moments.

Which are the most valid approaches for the recovery after the Covid-19 crisis?

Post-traumatic stress, denial, collective depression, burnout and rage can be experienced after any organizational shake up. And now **employees expect more** from their employers than ever

before. Rebuilding the company requires leading the community through a **process of ethical and sustainable renewal**. This change cannot be dictated from above. Hierarchy can demand conformity, but cannot impose optimism, trust, conviction or creativity. **Innovation requires new attitudes** and participation, to be encouraged through listening programs, community mobilization and inclusion.

Which role will top and middle managers play to support employees to make sense of the new organizational realities?

Managing recovery after a disaster is a **make-or-break time for a manager**. Traditional management approaches could be useless or damaging. Disproving the theory that advocates a dictator in such moments, a **variety of opinions is essential** when dealing with an emergency and during recovery.

The objective of recovery programs is not necessarily to rebuild the pre-existing functionalities, but **renewed and different functionalities** in an unknown environment. Rediscovering the sense of community helps overcome anxiety. Another focus for managers is **mental health of people**: collective psychological wellness is necessary for a community to recover from a serious event. We need to **encourage an entrepreneurial spirit** and

accept vulnerability and negative emotions, to heal the contradictions that a positive attitude at all costs would generate.

How do you see the evolution of remote working following the Covid-19 crisis?

In the remote working era employees no longer need to relocate to assume a role. **Talented employees** have **more opportunities** available since they can work online. To retain their workforce companies must prioritize **transparency and flexibility**.

Stressful environments can provoke high turnover and critical recruitment issues. **Attachment** to the company and **organizational citizenship behavior** will make the difference. A sense of community implies **mutual commitment** around shared values, a **past** lived and **experienced together, service-oriented behavior** and **respect**: all priorities to be cultivated.



What conclusions and what open questions?

The study shows that

- The **strategic role** of internal communication was strengthened, and it stood out for **concreteness, timeliness, authenticity** and **consistency with external communication**
- **Employee engagement** during the pandemic slightly **increased** compared to normal times, at least in the first year of the crisis: probably many people lived their job as a superior mission, contributing to overcome the health and economic emergency
- **Remote working** during the pandemic was **mainly appreciated**, making employees **work experience more sustainable**
- The **internal crisis communication approach** was mainly revolved to **accommodation**, which can be considered preferable to preserve the relationship with the special group of internal stakeholders.

Some open questions emerged

- How to preserve in the future the recognition of the **contribution** that internal communication can give to the definition of successful **company strategies** and to the effectiveness of **external communication**?
- How to spur managers in adopting the behaviors of this **emergency leadership**, able to engage people, also when the pandemic will soften?
- How to overcome the main **limitations of remote working**, experienced in terms of lack of creativity, decrease in cultural cohesion and loss of the social and emotional side of the work experience?



Methodological appendix

The research **Internal Crisis Communication in the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic** is based on both on a qualitative and a quantitative study. The **qualitative study** was conducted between April and May 2020. It included two focus groups, that allowed to collect insights from fourteen companies, and ten individual interviews involving internal communication managers operating in Italian companies (one video interview and nine email interviews). Collected data were related to internal crisis communication's general role and objectives, conveyed contents and messages, tools and initiatives. The qualitative study allowed also to investigate the main challenges and difficulties faced by internal communicators during the crisis.

The **quantitative study** was conducted through **two surveys** in order to allow the comparison of data over time and with other contexts among different samples. The first survey involved **internal communication managers operating in Italian companies**. The second survey involved **employees working in Italian companies**. Data were collected between July and December 2020 through the submission of an **online questionnaire**.

The conceptual model and the topics to be investigated have been developed on the basis of a review of international literature on the topics covered and on the results of the qualitative study conducted for this research. Respondents were invited question-by-question to report perceptions and information that the role they played allowed them to possess as key-informants.

For the **first survey**, the reference universe of the study is that of Italian companies. Participants were managers responsible for internal communication in Italian organizations recruited through a snow-ball technique.

Overall, the **sample of the first survey** can be considered **significant** for various reasons: the number of cases, the professional homogeneity of the respondents, all involved in internal communication activities, the high level of interest shown by respondents in accepting the invitation and in answering all the questions in almost all cases, the heterogeneity of the companies included in the sample, in relationship to the industrial sector, age, size, nature.

For the **second survey**, the reference universe of the study is that of employees working in Italian companies. Participants were employees and middle managers that worked in private companies and were not involved in communication and human resource management activities. They were recruited through a snow-ball technique.

Overall, the **sample of the second survey** can be considered **significant** for various reasons: the number of cases, the high level of interest shown by respondents in accepting the invitation and in answering all the questions in almost all cases, the heterogeneity of the companies they work in, in relationship to the industrial sector, age, size, nature.

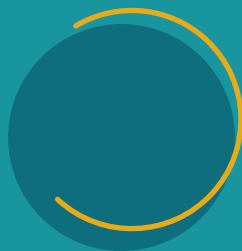
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Centre for Employee Relations and Communication

has the purpose of developing and spreading communication and organizational relations culture. It carries out research, dissemination, training and consultancy projects on topics related to employee relations and communication. It is supported by a scientific committee which ensures its connection with the main international centers of excellence in this field. It houses the Working Group Employee Communication.

WG_EC

Working Group Employee Communication

is dedicated to a two-year special research project in partnership with a group of companies. It carries out a research project on an agreed topic. Partner companies and Università IULM researchers meet regularly during the year for updates on the results of the research project and to delve into topics of interest for the WG_EC. The meetings are topic-focused and run in a peer to peer context.

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The study **INTERNAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC** outlines:

- which internal crisis communication strategies have been adopted by Italian companies during the emergency
- how the working experience of employees has been

The study is based on interviews, focus groups and a survey with internal communication managers and a survey with employees.

It reports **data** about:

- strategies, objectives, content, tools, features, difficulties, informal communication, roles of top and line managers and internal communication managers, and future evolution of internal communication
- practices and initiatives to support employee engagement and their outcomes

The study offers a **focus on remote working** reporting data about its impact on working life, resources available, enablers and benefits.

Findings show whether internal crisis communication strategies have been mostly oriented to **advocacy**, perched in company interests, or to **accommodation**, to protect internal stakeholders.

It has been carried out by the Working Group 2018-2020 and 2020-2022 @Centre for Employee Relations and Communication (CERC) operating at Università IULM.

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