Managing the Internal Communications Function in an Organization

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Abstract

This article focuses on highlighting the fact that internal communication or employee communication is a very important part of an organization. The main purpose of this research is to demonstrate the key role that communication plays in a work environment, that it has become a core element in any modern organization and that modern-day internal communicators should be able to convert a business strategy into a concept that stirs the interest of all employees.

From our own point of view, the place where the internal communications function should sit inside an organization should be within a specifically created internal communications department, but nowadays internal communicators can be found in human resources, public relations or marketing, all of these currently claiming the right to hold this type of specialists.

The main conclusion of this article is that in terms of internal communication, the department which is mainly responsible for the information flow inside an organization is the human resources department. Furthermore, in the near future, no organization has taken into consideration the possibility of creating a department of internal communication or an internal communicator function.

Keywords: internal communication, department, function, organization, human resources

1. Introduction

We believe that internal communication or employee communication is an important part of an organization, because it ensures the information flow which is vital to the success of that organization. Most leaders worldwide have come to recognise the fact that having a good communication strategy is a key element that contributes to the success of an organization, while other people have become increasingly aware of the fact that successful organizations do in fact communicate with their employees.

Communication is therefore a vital flow which enables the performance of an organization. On its quality and functionality depends on how resources are used and purposes achieved. Any organization is made up, as shown by Graham and Bennet, of the "premise (common business goals), employees, management, equipment, materials, funds" (Graham & Bennett 1995: 121). *In the work process, communication plays a crucial role because any social-technical system implies a flow of information that enables operation as a*

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whole. Work in the organizational framework requires coordination of efforts in achieving performance of the participants. Management communicates to employees its decisions, controls their execution and decisions that are based in turn on the flow of information.

In the past, employee communication was not at all a subject of interest for most of the members of the board of an organization. Today, however, communication has become a core element in any modern organization and modern-day internal communicators should be able to convert a business strategy into a concept that stirs the interest of all employees.

During the 1980s, old mindsets broke down as senior managers started to understand the role that internal communication could play within their organizations and, as a consequence, the *personnel department* became the *human resources department*, a major transformation at an organizational level. It was also the living proof that the management of the organization had begun to understand the importance of work and the fact that it involved training and coordination. Therefore, senior managers had to communicate with their employees, whether they were willing to do it or not, whether they liked it or not. Over time, they began to be aware of the fact that a good manager should also be a good communicator and that if you treat employees well and with respect, your corporate reputation can only grow in stature.

There have been countless discussions about the place where the internal communications function should sit inside an organization. Nowadays, internal communicators can be found in human resources, public relations or marketing, all of these currently claiming the right to hold this type of specialists.

2. The internal communications practitioner

One of the most in-depth surveys of the internal communications function has been provided by Nick Helsby (2002). The Watson Helsby report sought to explore the role of senior practitioners in 37 large UK and US businesses.

The report took as a given that the relationship between the employer and his employee has changed. It also states clearly that the need to get employee "buy-in" is a matter of importance to the board, and so professional internal communication has become crucial for business health.

Watson Helsby conducted this research because he wanted to see whether the role of internal communicator was gaining in complexity and influence. He also wanted to see whether the skills required had changed, where practitioners could add value and whether the individuals themselves were able to take advantage of the new opportunities.

The role of an internal communications practitioner has been described as still an immature one, and the report was intended to provide a "route map" in order to show how the function might grow inside a company or organization. Some top managers continue to have differing opinions regarding the role of internal communications within a company or organization, some seeing it as a

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little more than a “messaging service” with no particular place in the wider scheme of things, while others consider it to be an essential and extremely useful change agent.

Internal communication is an imperative for even the smallest of organizations. Experts in the field believe commitment or the lack of it on the part of the senior management and their willingness to devote time and resources to the internal communications function will determine the organization’s success. Honesty and integrity have come up time and time again as important not just for the practitioner but also for the top teams of the organizations in which the communicator operates. Without the commitment of the top team the function will not have the credibility it needs and this would have a negative impact on the information flow. The best internal communications practitioners will fail if they do not have the support and commitment of the senior team.

Fields of activity such as civil engineering, advertising, journalism, the police, occasionally even English – are just a few of the study areas, former careers and backgrounds from which internal communicators appear to come.

Following the Watson Helsby report, survey researchers concluded that a standard job description used for the Head of Internal Communication of the organizations participating in the survey at the time, includes the following responsibilities:

- is responsible for the continuous development and implementation of the internal communication strategy;
- is responsible for delivering, at an organizational level, the internal communication of corporate strategy and plans, including corporate vision and values;
- develops, manages and coordinates an effective network of internal communication contracts throughout the organization in order to maintain close links with all stakeholders or parts of the business, to ensure replication of best practices and consistency of messages, but also to enable leadership teams to make better decisions;
- ensures clear and unambiguous information is distributed in a timely, synchronised, relevant, appropriate and strategically aligned manner;
- manages and produces the internal communication element of major change programmes;
- provides internal communication consultancy services to HR management, IT and to other project and business managers;
- oversees and coordinates all employee research activity;
- champions the development of the intranet and develops/ manages its content;
- manages internal events (e.g. senior management conferences);

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- manages and produces communication tools including publications, videos, posters and Q&A's;
- sets and coordinates framework for team briefings and management cascades (Helsby 2002: 42).

3. Internal communication inside an organization

According to the Watson Helsby report, internal communication has an effect on all areas of the organization. The same report gives a breakdown of where internal communications practitioners can currently be found in organizations, with some 67 per cent finding a niche in corporate communication, 22 per cent in human resources and 10 per cent in marketing. Many respondents felt that they would be at a disadvantage and not well used if they were positioned in the departments of human resources or marketing. Corporate communication has been seen as appropriate as it makes possible the alignment of internal and external communications.

Next we are going to talk about a number of places within the organization where the internal communications function might sit.

3.1. Department of Human Resources

Human resources departments can be perceived as the mouthpiece of management.

Authors Ștefan Stanciu and Mihaela Ionescu consider that the HR department is the most adequate organizational structure entitled to use all the assets and resources of an organization in order to achieve strategic and short-term objectives and can deploy activities in the following areas

- staff, including employee recruitment, selection, hiring and promotion, management of employment work record cards or keeping records of the general register of personnel;
- education, including staff training (acquiring advanced knowledge in a specific field or improving a certain competence);
- payroll – establishing the salary, incentives and promotions;
- workload – establishing and updating employee work rates;
- assessing employee performance (Stanciu & Ionescu 2003: 44).

Specialists in the field of human resources are generally those who have the skills required to interact and communicate with a very diverse range of people, with different personalities and characters - skills that would prove extremely useful for internal communication specialists, as they would allow them to communicate more effectively.

The department of human resources is one of the most adequate structures in which the internal communications function could sit in, as it would have the following advantages:

- it is the one that understands how people think and act;

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- the main goal of the human resources managers is to become change agents and to make sure that the voices of all employees are heard - main concerns of the internal communications practitioners;
- human resources are normally concerned with specific issues that are more difficult to handle such as reorganization or dismissal;
- HR people can easily identify the benefits of a well-established internal communication function;
- HR people should be able to identify themselves with the employees' way of thinking.

In our opinion, this could only work under the following conditions:

- the interaction with the employees is one of the main concerns of the organization;
- the HR department gets involved in the daily activities of the organization - rather than being just a department included in the central structure of that organization;
- developing the skills of HR managers is one of the main objectives of this department;
- HR managers are open to employee feedback and do not perceive communication as a one-way process.

3.2. Department of Public Relations

According to Cristina Coman, the public relations department is responsible for managing and directing an organization's internal and external communications and it is also in charge of accomplishing specific tasks such as:

- anticipating public reactions and analysing customer feedback;
- providing counselling to senior management;
- creating and implementing public relations programmes;
- assessing these programmes;
- media monitoring;
- coordinating internal communications activities;
- organising events;
- identifying problems inside the organization and ensuring the information flow between senior management and internal or external audiences (Coman 2006: 62-63).

A more positive aspect is that an internal communicator wearing an external hat will be able to keep messages to both audiences (internal and external) consistent and therefore will also produce publications that staff will be willing to read. Moreover, this type of internal communicators would be part of the organization's senior management and would enjoy the right level of credibility that would allow them to accomplish their tasks and argue their case more successfully.

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3.3. Department of Marketing

An internal communications practitioner working within the department of marketing would prove to be highly effective, taking into account the fact that employees are interested in the results of campaigns and in new or renewed contracts, as their livelihoods depend on them.

A phrase often used within this department is "internal marketing". Employees should know the details about the product, its purpose and the way it should be sold.

In his classic textbook, P. Kotler (1996) defines marketing as *'A social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others'* (Kotler 1998: 35).

There are certain advantages that arise when we integrate the internal communications function within the department of marketing:

- when the need to align both external and internal messages prevails;
- when it is necessary, and most likely in terms of digital communication channels, to have a correspondence between the competences of the person communicating and the content of the message sent;
- when communication can make a significant difference.

3.4. Internal Communications Department

In an ideal world, a department specifically created for this function would be every internal communicator's dream. This department should take over the tasks that are normally completed by other departments and internal communication practitioners should be given key positions within it.

Having an internal communications department in an organization, internal communicators or at least a person to assume this responsibility implies the fact that the people concerned have all the necessary information about the organization and its culture, identity or values. In theory, these people should always be in touch with the management team, who makes all decisions concerning the organization and also with the people holding relevant information - not always one and the same person.

In her book, *Effective Internal Communication*, consultant Pamela Mounter asserts: *'Internal communication is the line management responsibility, the managers have to do it and the internal communications manager has to help manage it. If the board does not own it then you will not get anywhere'* (Smith & Mounter 2008: 51).

The ability to understand the exact responsibilities of an internal communicator is essential for developing close working relationships, without which the information flow would not get through.

An internal communications department needs to raise its credibility most especially inside the organization. Many outsiders, and quite a few insiders for

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that matter, are not capable of understanding the fact that keeping a workforce informed can and should be as rewarding a job as carrying out essentially the same function with an external audience.

A positive reason for having a dedicated internal communications department inside an organization would be one of immediacy, as its members could immediately roll into action as part of an organization's crisis management team.

4. Case study on internal communication in AIESEC Craiova

In order to conduct this case study on internal communication, I chose to analyse a local committee of an international NGO, the AIESEC Craiova organization, which is structured and operates exactly like a company.

AIESEC is a global, politically independent and not-for-profit organization, run by students and recent graduates of institutions of higher education. AIESEC is present in over 2,400 universities in its 125 member countries and territories and aims to impact the world through leadership development experiences of its members.

Within this organization, there is a specific department that takes charge of the internal communications function, and more precisely the Human Resources Department (formerly known as the Talent Management Department), which is empowered to work with representatives from all departments of the organization.

The human resources team includes the Vice President of Human Resources (who actually runs the department), the team leaders of the department (the middle management) and the members of the department.

Internally, information is communicated both directly and indirectly. Direct information is communicated during the meetings, which can be classified into several types. The first type of meeting is the local committee meeting (also known as the LC meeting) where all members of AIESEC Craiova can participate, regardless of the position they hold in the organization. During these weekly meetings of the organization, the president and the vice presidents of the departments of the organizations present a brief report of their weekly activities, decisions that have been made or available opportunities; this type of meetings consist of top-down communication. A second type of meeting is the departmental meeting, where decisions are made and future activities are planned; here we are facing horizontal (also known as lateral) communication. The final type of meeting, the team meeting, consists of brainstorming meetings and here communication is also horizontal. Indirect information is communicated by e-mail and facebook groups where all members have joined. Here the communication is usually top-down.

The Human Resources Department is in charge of communicating with all the members of the organization and makes sure that every person in the organization is up to date with what is happening inside the organization and

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that they are at the right place and doing what they are supposed to do or suits them. All information directly related to the members of this organization is sent by this department both directly and indirectly. The person responsible for the internal communication in AIESEC is the vice president of human resources, and so far, this type of internal communication has worked very well, so no one has taken into consideration the possibility of creating an internal communications department or function. The communication channels used internally by AIESEC are the following: local committee meetings, department meetings, team meetings, team buildings, e-mail, facebook groups, video conferencing, troika meetings (departments of human resources, marketing and outgoing exchange), board meetings. AIESEC has a planned, systematic and multidisciplinary internal communication strategy, in order to ensure the best possible training to its members.

5. Conclusions

We conclude, therefore, by stating that in modern society, the manager is the person that generally takes charge of the specific tasks of the internal communications function and that the department responsible for the information flow within an organization is the human resources department. This statement is supported by the results of the survey we conducted in order to assess the internal communications function within several companies from Romania, such as ELECTROPUTERE Craiova, MITLIV Craiova, RDS & RCS, PERLA CARPAȚILOR, KRUK Romania, HOYA Lens Romania, PIRELLI Slatina, Supermarket PROFI Romania, Uzina Mecanică Drăgășani (Mechanical Plant Drăgășani), DGASPC Olt, or within the AIESEC Craiova organization.

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