Internal Communication Challenges in Corporate South Africa After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The survival of organisations relies heavily on effective internal communication, yet this function faces increasingly complex and often conflicting challenges – especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite its importance, relatively little research has been published on internal communication challenges in emerging economies, particularly in South Africa, and no studies have explored these issues in the post-pandemic context. To address this gap, this qualitative longitudinal study inductively explores internal communication challenges in the South African corporate environment following the pandemic. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with internal communication practitioners from South Africa's Top 500 Companies, as well as with highly regarded internal communication consultants. Analysis of pre-pandemic data identified 12 challenges faced by internal communication functions. These were grouped into four categories: access to technology, lack of formal communication training, parameters for including internal stakeholders, and management styles and structures. The longitudinal findings of this study indicate that many of these challenges are still relevant and have even worsened. In addition, new themes have emerged post-pandemic, including employee well-being, little credible information, digital imbalance and future work structure issues. The study offers suggestions to mitigate these challenges and provides practical recommendations for both internal communication practice and future research.

Keywords

Challenges, communication consultants, communication practitioners, corporate South Africa, COVID-19 pandemic, internal communication

INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that the survival of an organisation depends largely on internal communication. This communication function ensures success and contributes to long-term goal achievement of the organisation (IC Kollectif, 2018; Meng & Boyd, 2017). However, internal communication issues can jeopardise internal relationships and seriously affect the organisation (Kim et al., 2019; Ruppel et al., 2022). Moreover, most external challenges influence the macro and meso levels of the organisation, with a direct effect on the micro level of the organisation and the internal communication environment (Roux et al., 2019).

In many emerging economies such as South Africa, organisations struggle with problems that affect their survival and relate directly to their employees, such as employee strikes, low education levels, digital divides and maladministration (Bhorat et al., 2017; BusinessTech, 2018; PwC, 2018). These factors put pressure on both the employees and the organisation. It emphasises both the need for internal communication and how essential internal communication management is within such a context.

Over and above these challenges, the South African apartheid history brought about some distinctive political and economic conundrums for organisations in this environment. One such example is the

Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act (BEE), which was introduced by the government as a strategy to achieve transformation and equality in the private sector (Ndhlovu, 2011). As part of this law, very specific objectives are established: Black ownership must constitute at least 51% of the company, the development of employees through education, training and mentoring focuses on these specific groups, and priority is given to the empowerment and advancement of Black women (Chimhandamba, 2008). BEE, however, also has financial consequences for the company, such as the costs when ownership must be transferred, reduced productivity, decrease in profits and the costs of skill development and training (Acemoglu et al., 2007). The financial resources invested in BEE appointments, in turn, often lead to discord, internal conflict and unhappiness in the workplace. These factors are directly related to the relationship between employer and employees as well as the management of internal stakeholders.

Besides BEE and difficult economic and political conditions, South African organisations and communication practitioners often face other unique challenges, such as creating understanding between internal stakeholders of diverse cultures, where racial tension is often experienced internally, and mitigating language barriers with 12 official languages (Sutton, 2023). The accepted business language in South Africa is English. However, due to the diverse language skills of the workforce, there are often several internal stakeholders whose first language is not English. Internal communication must therefore receive specific attention to combat misinterpretations that could lead to loss of productivity (Hood, 2019). Non-verbal communication is often misinterpreted within the South African context, as employees come from different cultural backgrounds.

Another social issue in the South African workforce that adds negatively to the internal environment is xenophobia, described by Tella (2016) as the hatred of foreigners or immigrants. This anti-immigrant attitude and fear of immigrants taking South African citizens' jobs lead to industrial activism and riots, which also contribute to instability, uncertainty and fear among internal stakeholders. The complex work environment necessitates organisations creating a safe work environment for future sustainable employment. The challenge for communication practitioners is to communicate about these issues to create internal stability for local and international employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the workplace by creating an unstable environment that threatened organisations' viability and survival (Wade & Bjerkan, 2020). The significance of internal communication as a lifeline for organisations was emphasised during and after the pandemic (Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021; Kim et al., 2023). Within this setting and the resulting dispersed "work-from-home" policies, internal communication became central to organisational continuity during the pandemic (Li et al., 2021; Santoso et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2021). Organisations had to fundamentally adjust the way they communicated with their internal stakeholders, which resulted in a greater reliance on digital, online (web-based activities), electronic and virtual platforms (Von Gaudecker et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2024). Similar to other countries, South Africa also experienced various forms of lockdown in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which severely impacted on organisational health, employee well-being and organisation–employee relationships as internal communication became central to organisational survival (Santoso et al., 2022).

Given these challenging circumstances, it seems that relatively little has been published on internal communication challenges in emerging economies and even less on these issues in the South African context (Sutton et al., 2022), with no research on the topic after the pandemic. Sutton et al. (2022:100) specifically called for research on the topic "that is further adapted to the post-COVID-19 setting".

Scholars argue that African countries cannot look at their Western counterparts in the developed world for solutions, as the challenges they face are mostly unique and not understood by Western academics (Maritz, 2002; Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023; Rensburg, 2002). Furthermore, Lee and Yue (2020), Sutton (2023) and Tkalac Verčič et al. (2024) argue that more research is needed on internal communication from a non-Western perspective, which includes emerging economies and African countries such as South Africa. To fill these gaps, this qualitative study adds to the internal communication conundrums encountered in the emerging South African corporate context and to new research after the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the above in mind, the following research question guided the study: What internal communication challenges can be identified in corporate South Africa after the COVID-19 pandemic?

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

From data collected in 2019, Sutton et al. (2022) found several challenges that have a direct impact on internal communication in the South African corporate environment. These were categorised into four overarching groups: (i) access to technology, (ii) lack of formal communication training, (iii) parameters for inclusion of internal stakeholders, and (iv) management styles and structures. These challenges, as identified by the participants during qualitative semi-structured interviews, are briefly discussed below (see Sutton et al., 2022:93–99):

Access to technology

New technological advancements, but limited access

The country's infrastructure has a negative impact on Internet availability. Many organisations do not make access to WiFi or the Internet available to all their employees, and many employees do not have access to a smartphone or similar device. In some instances, electronic communication to lower-level staff members, such as miners, factory workers or shopkeepers, is limited as they are not allowed to access their devices while working. By implication, only office-based or higher-level employees receive electronic internal communication.

Information overload

Those with access to technology suffer from information overload, and many times important internal communication messages get lost. Furthermore, it seems that communication practitioners often try to fix communication problems by adding further channels or platforms for communication. This increases the amount of information employees need to filter and leaves them overwhelmed.

Lack of formal communication training

Diverse demographical characteristics

The South African internal organisational environment is known for its diverse workforce with regard to education, literacy levels, language and access to public services. Internal communication practitioners communicate simultaneously with employees who are illiterate and those who have university degrees, as well as people speaking a variety of languages.

Prejudice and diversity

Due to South Africa's historical past and its current focus on eliminating discrimination and prejudice against race, gender, orientation, religion and other beliefs in communication, more formal documented communication is often used in an attempt to eliminate prejudice. As a result, normative two-way symmetrical communication is often avoided.

Little formal communication education

The low education levels in South Africa have a direct negative impact on the low level of diverse formally trained internal communication practitioners in the workplace. Practitioners, therefore, struggle to navigate the current communication challenges, and to function on a strategic level to navigate technological advancements from an expert perspective.

Parameters for inclusion of internal stakeholders

Uncertainty as to who are considered internal stakeholders

The parameters of who should be classified as internal stakeholders are disputed in the South African business environment. Other than traditional internal stakeholders, classified as permanent employees, another broader group could also be included, such as contractors, part-time employees, consultants and agents. A debated issue is whether unions should form part of the internal grouping. Including these various groups would undoubtedly add complexity to internal communication.

Internal activism and the influence of trade unions

Trade unions are often politically driven, which fuels friction between organisations and their employees, incites activist action and results in destruction.

Management styles and structures

Hierarchy and line management

There are few opportunities for employees to share their ideas, opinions and concerns with senior management as hierarchical systems are not open or flattened in organisations. Following the hierarchical system, messages are filtered upwards, with little feedback being received downwards. This is specifically seen in middle management who are not part of decision making and therefore not able to feed information downwards.

History of autocratic leaders influencing current internal relationships

The historic organisational culture created by autocratic leadership styles and the fact that employees did not have pleasant experiences with previous autocratic executives and CEOs hinders the current relationship between the parties. Furthermore, new emerging or succeeding leaders do not result in significant changes to the culture inside organisations, as they exhibit the same traits as their predecessors who did not practice participative leadership.

Authoritarian leadership style and an internal culture of non-involvement

Employees are cautious to question or oppose management, because they find their leaders' communication style threatening or because of the belief that individuals should respect leaders and those in positions of power. Interestingly, it seems that more authoritarian, one-way communication produces better outputs and results for organisations.

Internal distrust

The internal stakeholders do not trust the leaders in organisations, mainly because employees are uninformed and consequently sceptical. This, in alignment with the powerless position of middle management, adds to a lack of trust. In addition, the political climate in South Africa, which is exploited by trade unions, as mentioned earlier, further contributes to internal mistrust.

Limited access to decision-making input from communication departments

The communication departments in South African organisations are seen as operational and they focus on technical tasks. Therefore, the internal communication functions (or the heads of these departments) are not invited to senior or executive meetings or represented at decision-making forums, which limits their strategic contribution.

See Sutton et al. (2022) for more details on the challenges identified before the pandemic in the corporate South African environment, which influenced the practice of internal communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic delivered even greater challenges to organisations. There seems to have been an adjustment in people's perception of their internal organisational environment. As a result,

shifts in the internal organisational environment have demanded renewed approaches and perspectives regarding the functions of internal communication in addressing ongoing and newly emerging challenges that organisations are facing in the post-COVID-19 era (Neill & Kang, 2023).

Therefore, this study aimed to build on the previously identified challenges by identifying additional challenges that emerged after the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHOD

A longitudinal qualitative approach (see Babbie & Mouton, 2001) was followed in this study, as we wanted to understand the perceptions and challenges that communication practitioners faced in the South African corporate environment before and after the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2019 with two groups who were purposively selected (see Kumar, 2014) for their knowledge on the subject:

i. Ten internal communication practitioners who manage internal communication at the Top 500 companies in South Africa. They were selected for the insider perspective on the challenges they face daily in the workplace.
ii. Eight internal communication consultants who are highly experienced, are regarded as leaders in the field and have won several local and international awards for their work. They were selected for their outsider perspective on the internal communication challenges they encounter by working for multiple organisations as consultants.

These participants represent various sectors, namely, education and training, health and beauty, tourism, dairy production, mining, food processing, investment and asset management, agriculture and diversified retailers. The findings from this round of interviews were published in 2022 in *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa* (see Sutton et al., 2022).

A second round of semi-structured interviews with the same participants was conducted in 2022. As is usually the case with longitudinal research (see Bryman, 2012), some of the participants were not available again, mainly because they had changed jobs or a participant had passed away. It was decided not to include new participants, as the aim was to understand the perceptions of the same group of participants and how their perceptions had changed over time. In the second round, nine interviews realised with four practitioners from the Top 500 companies in South Africa and five consultants.

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants who were interviewed in the second round and whose responses were used in this study.

Table 1: Overview of participants

Round 2 interview participants	Inhouse practitioner or consultant
Participant 1	Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the hotels and resorts sector
Participant 2	Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the dairy production sector
Participant 3	Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the agriculture sector
Participant 4	Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the education and training sector
Participant 5	Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries
Participant 6	Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries
Participant 7	Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries
Participant 8	Consultant in the forestry sector
Participant 9	Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries

During both data collection stages, emails were sent to participants with detail about the research project and to invite them to participate in the study. The semi-structured interviews were conducted via

online platforms such as Zoom or MS Teams, scheduled for a date and time convenient for the participant, and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Their participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained before the interviews commenced, as prescribed by the ethical clearance obtained for this research project. The anonymity of participants and organisations was guaranteed by deidentifying them in reporting the data.

The interview schedule was designed with open and broad questions to explore the challenges practitioners and consultants face within the internal corporate environment in South Africa, with a particular focus on their personal perceptions of these challenges. To capture additions or possible changes in their experiences and perspectives, the same set of questions was asked at two distinct points in time – once before the COVID-19 pandemic (which has already been reported on) and again after it. This approach aimed to provide insights into possible additional challenges from their perceptions in response to the pandemic.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the data was inductively analysed through qualitative content analysis (see Flick, 2014). Several challenges emerged from the data and themes were created to identify the internal communication challenges in the South African corporate environment. Both authors analysed the data and compared the themes with each other to contribute to the validity of the qualitative data (see Du Plooy, 2009).

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES AFTER THE PANDEMIC

This study aims to build on the previously identified challenges by identifying additional challenges that emerged after the COVID-19 pandemic. It should be noted that our findings show that most of the challenges identified in the South African environment are still relevant and have even worsened. Many of the challenges identified before the pandemic were mentioned again in the second round. However, the focus of this article is on the additional themes of internal communication issues that emerged during and especially after the pandemic. The extra themes (challenges) that we inductively identified are (i) employee well-being, (ii) little credible information, (iii) digital imbalance, and (iv) future work structure issues.

Employee well-being

During COVID-19 and due to the lockdown, people experienced uncertainty and change. Unexpectedly, employees had to work from home and take on the educator's role with their children. Participant 4 noted: "I have my kid next to me writing exams, while I am on Teams calls 10 hours a day". Furthermore, Participant 7 explained: "Our lives have been incredibly disrupted. Employees must get up, get dressed, go to the office, work for eight hours and come home. After COVID it feels like we must now continue with the day's work at home, while trying to homeschool our kids, while trying to go buy groceries, while trying to sort out the house. So, life has put more strain on people".

Furthermore, internal stakeholders experience anxiety and stress because of the uncertainties, and they suffer emotionally because many friends, colleagues and family members lost their lives. The aftermath of COVID-19 is still evident in South Africa, as many businesses (small, medium and micro enterprises and large corporates) are in debt review or have closed. Organisations are struggling to survive in the turbulent economic conditions. Companies must stop some of their projects and lay off employees to save costs, in order to prevent these companies from going under. Participant 7 noted that employees were more "loyal towards the organisation out of fear for retrenchment or salary cuts".

As a result, internal stakeholders were suffering from mental health issues because of financial insecurity – which is at the basic level of human existence. Furthermore, employees were facing physical, emotional, economic and digital well-being challenges. The participants stated that the needs of internal stakeholders changed to basic level and the communication needs had to change accordingly (even though in many instances this did not). Participant 5 explained: "All employees now want security, and everyone moved down to the bottom of Maslow's triangle of basic needs … Employees want to know how will I stay healthy, how will I keep my job, how will I care for my family …" Participant 7 also explained that

"there has been a lot of burnout and a lot of fatigue, and people have been in a survival mindset and not a growth mindset after COVID".

From an internal communication point of view, the wellness team or department should be supported by communicating about these well-being challenges. However, it seemed that there was little communication action with a clear sense of the whole person (in their personal context and within their family and social circumstances). Participant 7 noted: "Particularly in the content that is generated, it has to speak to the whole human being and their mindset at the time. It has got to be cognitive, empathetic, action-orientated, and speak to the entirety of a human being. Whereas, I think before the pandemic, internal communication focused mostly on the work aspect of communication".

There is a need to focus on people more, and take their stress, anxiety, burnout factors and overall well-being issues into consideration, because it impacts on productivity, cost utilisation per head, service delivery, customer value management and, eventually, on the triple bottom line.

Little credible information

In general, most companies did not bother to provide credible information to employees in response to COVID-19. One of the participants mentioned that organisations in South Africa hid behind government rules and regulations and government decisions, without educating their employees on the virus, vaccines, issues they were worrying about or financial information about the business. It was left to employees to read on the Internet or watch television to find out what the government was telling them.

Organisations seldom sent credible information, gave direction or advice to employees and seemed to be confused about how to keep the business going. For example, Participant 5 explained: "It is like the parable where the little boy cried 'Wolf! Wolf!' and the people ran away. And then one day when there was a real wolf, the people did not trust him. In the same way, it seems like employees ignored [organisational information] during the real crisis". This resulted in "rumours" (Participant 1) and the grapevine taking over as the most used internal communication channel among employees, with little trust in the organisation.

After the pandemic, it seems that distrust in organisational leadership was still one of the main challenges, because of a lack of transparent internal communication and widespread corruption. In general, people in South Africa do not know who to believe, and trust in the employers and its leadership will have to be "built from scratch" (Participant 6). Participant 8 stated that "employees trust the organisation's leadership just as much as they trust government's leadership".

Digital imbalance

During the pandemic, there was a deep need to embrace digital channels internationally. However, in the South African context, employees felt that the "wealthy" top-level management sat in their "fancy homes" (Participant 8) during the lockdown, while most of the ground-level employees did not have the means to continue to work from home. Most companies could not afford to send employees home with the hardware, software and data (such as a laptop and Internet dongle) needed to continue with their work. The participants also indicated that there were many employees who did not have a home environment that was conducive to work – for example, many South African employees reside in informal settlements in a dwelling of between 6m² and 20m², where more than one family lives, often without running water or electricity. Participant 8 explained that "it is quite clear that there are people that do not have a home environment that is very conducive to work. These employees actually prefer to work at the office because working from home is difficult". Participant 6 also noted that "many companies did not invest in making sure their managers manage their people properly remotely".

During the pandemic, only staff who had devices and were able to go online had access and could benefit from employee wellness programmes that some of the corporates established during that time. Participant 9 noted that "from an internal communication point of view, we are so instrumental in supporting the wellness team of the organisation in communicating the challenges around well-being, whether it is sensory ergonomics, whether it is mental health, whether it is financial well-being … But access to the right channels to communicate this is the problem …". As was evident before the pandemic,

the digital divide in South Africa became a bigger issue during and after the pandemic, with a direct influence on internal communication practices.

Future work structure issues

Although literature suggests that a hybrid workplace model gives employees more autonomy and a better work–life balance (SAP, 2024), most South African organisations were reluctant about the work-from-home approach and reverted back to the traditional office-bound approach after the pandemic. One reason could be the digital and social imbalances addressed in the above themes. The collapse of Transnet (the state-owned transport company) and the failed railway system contribute to the problem to get employees to work safely and affordably. However, it seems that some employees who had the means to create a work environment at home preferred to do so and wanted flexibility. Participant 5 mentioned that "people do not want to come back to the office, people have different requirements, they have different expectations of the organisation and their team leaders". Participant 9 further mentioned: "It is all very multi-dimensional. You now got the dynamic with the petrol prices in South Africa … the reality is people are saying, I have proven I can work remotely during COVID. Why are you forcing me to come back to the office at the expense [transport and petrol price] that I might not be able to afford now, in order to do what I have proven to you already that I can do".

From the internal communication participants' point of view, a hybrid model poses more communication channel challenges, more engagement challenges and more internal culture challenges. The structure of not having all employees at the office at the same time, with some employees at the office but being on online calls (such as MS Teams/Zoom meetings), while other employees are at home, talking on the same online calls, is difficult to manage. Participant 9 noted that "with a hybrid approach, there are conflicting priorities and needs from internal stakeholders in different spaces at different points in time". Conversely, it is not ideal to force all employees to go back to the office, because having "prescriptive leadership" (Participant 3) could lead to a negative corporate culture and unengaged employees.

In some operational roles, the work-from-home policy is enforced, but Participant 7 noted that "the impact that COVID-19 has had on people … they feel quite isolated even though they are on Zoom and Teams from sunup to sundown … there isn't that special connection with colleagues that happens in the physical space". Participant 9 added that "you cannot build relationship capital by permanently being disconnected from your teams".

On a positive note, the internal communication department found its place during the pandemic and functions more strategically in many organisations. The importance of internal communication is proven, and people have seen the impact that communication can have on an organisation, especially in a time of crisis. Participant 1 noted that internal communicators became part "of the father figures during the crisis". Therefore, as all the participants noted, the internal communication manager is now more often drawn into decision-making structures. Furthermore, after the pandemic, organisations realised that "in terms of expenditure, we need to invest more in internal communication" (Participant 5).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The past decade has seen much progress in research on internal communication and a much greater recognition of the importance of internal communication for organisational success (Lee & Yue, 2020; Men, 2021; Yue et al., 2024). In addition, research has shown that turbulent times place a renewed focus on the role of internal communication for organisational survival, as was seen during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Akhmetshin et al., 2019; Horlait & Lambotte, 2021; Liu-Lasters et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021; Santoso et al., 2022). At the same time, knowledge of specific issues or challenges in emerging economies remains weak, with very little research on how these issues influence the internal communication environment in the complex South African context (Sutton et al., 2022) and no research on these challenges after the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the world is changing, and organisations are continuously presented with new challenges, which were amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ararat et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023). South African organisations face several challenges in what is labelled as the most trying and

unstable environment we have ever encountered (Kalidas et al., 2020).

The findings of internal communication challenges in corporate South Africa before and after the pandemic are presented as a framework (see Figure 1 below) to answer the research question posed for this study: What internal communication challenges can be identified in corporate South Africa after the COVID-19 pandemic?

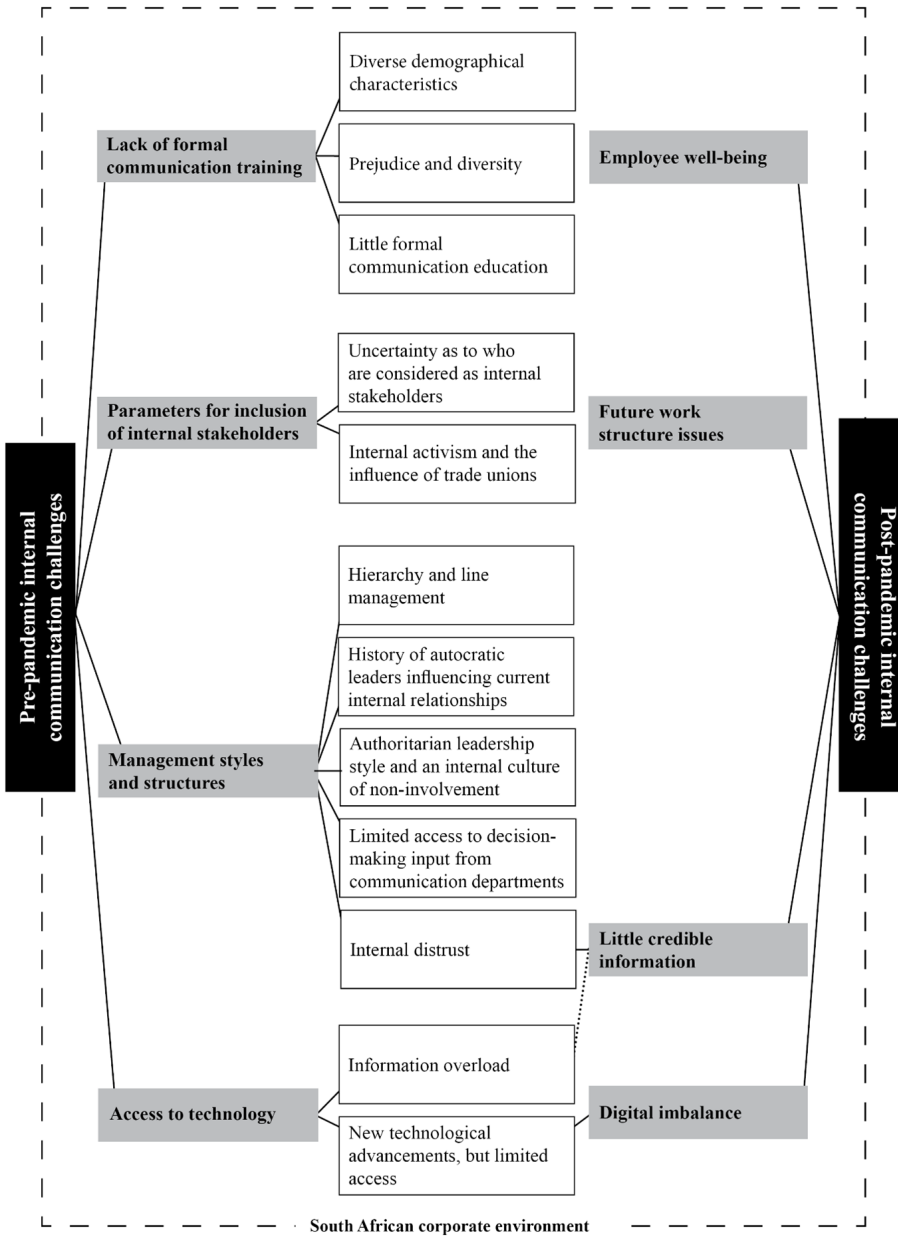

Figure 1: Internal communication challenges in corporate South Africa

First, most of the challenges identified pre-pandemic are still relevant issues in the South African environment. These themes include *lack of formal communication training* (which includes diverse demographical characteristics, prejudice and diversity, and little formal communication education), *parameters for inclusion of internal stakeholders* (which includes uncertainty as to who are considered internal stakeholders, internal activism and the influence of trade unions), as well as *management styles and structures* (which includes hierarchy and line management, history of autocratic leaders influencing current internal relationships, authoritarian leadership style and an internal culture of non-involvement).

Second, the pre-pandemic challenge of *access to technology* where technological advancements were an international trend, in the South African internal environment there is limited access to smart devices and Internet, which seems to have increased during the pandemic and lockdown where employees had to work from home. Since the pandemic, the issue has become even worse, highlighting the theme of *digital imbalance*.

Third, there was a change in the pre-pandemic challenge of information overload under the theme of *access to technology*, as employees felt that they did not receive enough information from their employers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theme of *little credible information* emerged, as the participants emphasised that internal stakeholders sought transparent and reliable information, aligned with the pre-pandemic challenge of internal distrust, which worsened during and after the pandemic.

Fourth, a positive change came to light from the challenge of limited access to decision-making input from communication departments under the pre-pandemic theme of *management styles and structures*, where the pandemic highlighted the importance of internal communication and, consequently, communication managers are now mostly involved in strategic decisions.

Lastly, two new themes emerged from the post-pandemic data, namely *employee well-being* and *future work structure issues*. These challenges identified that employees in South Africa are stressed and anxious about losing their jobs, especially since the pandemic where organisations are struggling to survive in a harsh economic climate. The well-being of employees is a challenge for internal communication practitioners in the "new-normal" hybrid work environment, seeing that many organisations reverted back to the traditional structures instead of a hybrid approach, which seems to have negatively influenced internal corporate culture.

With the above challenges in mind, internal communication efforts must adapt accordingly, and the following recommendations are made for internal communication practitioners and consultants to navigate the complex and difficult internal environment in South Africa:

- Employee well-being must be a priority in all internal communication, as emphasised in other reports and studies as well (e.g., CIPD, 2023; Qin & Men, 2023). Internal communication practitioners should understand the needs of employees in order to craft communication that will resonate with employees.
- Further investigation to find a workable solution for hybrid working, by creating new workplace structures, needs to be spearheaded by internal communication practitioners, as communication will be central in these efforts and to keeping a coherent organisational culture. Communication about future workplace structures has been highlighted as a central need by a number of scholars (e.g., Pass & Ridgway, 2022; Zarraga-Rodriguez & Alvarez, 2015).
- Internal communication training is needed, not only for communication practitioners but also for line managers and senior management (organisational leadership). It became evident that senior managers should improve their behavioural competencies to be trusted leaders, and that line managers should contribute to improve upward and downward communication flow. The importance of line management (middle management) participation in the internal communication process has also been emphasised in several previous studies (e.g., Allen et al., 2007; Holland et al., 2017; Usadolo & Usadolo, 2019). Furthermore, a focus on soft skills, internal communication guidance and toolkits is needed to manage internal stakeholders and teams in different spaces. Employee well-being needs to remain central to training.
- In the South African context, internal stakeholders' needs should be measured through more

informal feedback from the ground-level employees on a regular basis, because digital imbalances make online questionnaires and communication audits non-viable. Furthermore, the inclusion of additional communication measurements is needed to determine employee concerns and to address well-being issues, as recommended by other studies (e.g., Araújo & Pestana, 2017; Wijngaards et al., 2021).

. The employees should be informed regularly about the future of the company, strategic issues, financial results and performance signals (positive or negative), seeing that they feel disinformed, uncertain and anxious about the sustainability of the organisation and their jobs in the current corporate climate. It is the organisation's responsibility to protect the business and to communicate transparently and honestly about what the future holds, as confirmed in previous studies (e.g., Li et al., 2021; Ruppel et al., 2021).

This study proves once again that theory development is needed for the complex internal communication environment of South Africa. The identification of post-pandemic challenges shows that internal communication practitioners and consultants cannot apply Western theories to solve unique non-Western problems. Therefore, we call for more research and the development of a context-focused local theoretical framework to address the internal communication conundrums in the diverse corporate South African context.

We acknowledge that our study was relatively small in its qualitative nature, but the findings seem to resonate with various industry and academic reports that the world has changed and that communication practices need to adapt accordingly (e.g., Toth & Bourlands-Davis, 2023; Zerfass et al., 2023). It is suggested this study be expanded to a larger sample and across other emerging economies and African countries to obtain further insights on how organisations can address internal communication challenges in a sustainable manner.

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