

Internal Communication: Practices and Implications

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to understand the importance of internal communication in organizations and the value, impact and influence that practitioners associate with this function. This study focuses on the implications of internal communication from a practitioner's perspective. Data was gathered through an online survey using a convenience sampling method and analyzed to identify themes and patterns. Since internal communication as a function is nascent the researcher approached corporate communication practitioners directly on social media and communication forums. The survey was semi-structured and designed to obtain the perspectives of internal communication practitioners at all levels in their organization. The results from this study indicate that internal communication is viewed as important to organizational success although there are barriers that currently prevent the function from flourishing. Overall, the sentiments are positive about how internal communication is perceived among practitioners. This study is limited to the Asia Pacific region with a bias towards India since a majority of the responses were from the country. Therefore, the results can't be generalized across the practice.

Keywords: *internal communication, internal communication practitioner, culture, internal branding*



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Internal communication is receiving focus and organizations are investing in the function. The role of internal communication is to improve business value by communicating effectively with employees, being 'an important asset to the firm' and instilling a sense of belonging. Effective internal communication can reduce uncertainty and rumors, serve as a catalyst of change and the internal audience is the most important for the communicator. It also contributes to enhancing internal relationships and inculcating awareness of environmental change. Communicating effectively with employees can build organizational commitment, achieve superior business outcomes, influence corporate reputation, share knowledge,

gain trust, instill a sense of belonging, create awareness and engage employees. There is increasing evidence that employees are considered an important stakeholder, can influence corporate reputation, and act as ambassadors of the brand. Internal communication is viewed as the management of strategic relationships and interactions, impacting organizational effectiveness and as a systematic process and distribution of information at all levels.

Communicating effectively with employees can build organizational commitment, achieve superior business outcomes, influence corporate reputation, share knowledge, gain trust, instill a sense of belonging, create awareness and engage employees. (Kalla, 2005; Yates, 2006; Dortok, 2006, Welch and Jackson, 2007 and White, Vanc and Stafford, 2010).

Employees can be connected emotionally to the products or services the organization sells to customers, be motivated to work harder and stay loyal. However, the role of employees in making the organization's brand come alive for customers is less understood and employees are often ignored as a stakeholder (Mitchell, 2002). There is increasing evidence that employees are considered an important stakeholder, can influence corporate reputation (Dortok, 2006) and act as ambassadors of the brand (Dolphin, 2005).

Effective internal communication leads to improved business outcomes and committed employees are more productive. A Watson Wyatt study (Yates, 2006) with 260 US and 75 Canadian companies and among 335 participants discovered that effective communication is a leading indicator of an organization's financial performance and higher communication effectiveness results in a 19.4% increase in market premium. Such organizations are also 4.5 times more likely to have highly engaged employees. On the other hand, poor internal communication can be detrimental to organizational effectiveness and internal relationships if employees don't receive information in formats that are useful or acceptable to them (Welch, 2012).

The function is understood to be strategic in nature, multidimensional, multilevel and interconnected with the external environment. (Kalla, 2005; Dolphin, 2005; Welch and Jackson, 2007, Chong, 2007) and there are calls to recognize internal communication as a field of its own (Verčič, Verčič, and Sriramesh, 2012).

Internal communication plays a role in educating employees about the brand and reinforcing the psychological contract

between the employee and the organization (Chong, 2007, Mangold and Miles 2007). Although practitioners view internal communication as a management function that handles intra-organization interactions and which integrates different functions such as human resources management, communication and marketing there is a gap on the boundaries that it has influence over (Verčič, Verčič, and Sriramesh, 2012).

Furthermore, ongoing changes at the workplace with respect to the evolving expectations of the employees, disengaged workforces who want more open communication with managers make internal communication more important. (Argenti, 1998). With increased adoption of technology and usage of social media by employees (Cornelissen, 2011) what constitutes a boundary for an organization in relation to internal communication is still in question (Verčič, Verčič, and Sriramesh, 2012).

Limited research has been conducted on how internal communication practitioners understand the value, impact and implications of their function in improving commitment, identification and engagement. This paper heeds the call for more study on the impact and value of internal communication (Dolphin, 2005, Verčič, Verčič, and Sriramesh, 2012). This paper attempts to advance the understanding of relationships, support and resources needed to enable the internal communication practitioner in being effective at delivering positive business outcomes for the organization. It also aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice among practitioners.

Literature Review

Internal communication is receiving focus and organizations are investing in the function. (Chalmers, 2008, Watson Helsby, 2009). The role of internal communication is to improve business value by communicating effectively with employees, 'an important asset to the firm' and instilling a sense of belonging. Effective internal communication can reduce uncertainty and rumors, serve as a catalyst of change and the internal audience is the most important for the communicator. It also contributes to enhancing internal relationships and inculcating awareness of environmental change (Argenti, 1998, Dolphin, 2005, Welch and Jackson, 2007).

Yates (2006) explains that effective communication organizations excel in 8 areas - educating employees about

the organizational culture and values, helping connect employees to business, aligning employees' actions with customer needs, providing financial information and objectives, clarifying and promoting new programs and policies, integrating new employees into the organization, sharing information on the value of total rewards program and demonstrating leadership during change.

Approaches such as sharing information, investing in communication can help gain value in terms of higher shareholder returns, increased market premiums, enhanced employee engagement and lower turnover. Effective internal communication is referred to as 'a secret weapon' to enhance financial and organizational progress. Companies that invest and are great with internal communication deliver better market share, more shareholder value, increased engagement and lower employee turnover (Yates, 2006).

Internal Communication – Strategic and Multi-Faceted

Internal communication is viewed as the management of strategic relationships and interactions (Welch and Jackson, 2007), impacting organizational effectiveness (Welch, 2011) and as a systematic process and distribution of information at all levels (Verčič, Verčič and Sriramesh, 2012). Although there is an impetus on the need and importance of internal communication academic literature indicates that the dimensions and role of the function are understudied.

Verčič, Verčič and Sriramesh (2012) highlight the need for more research on the subject considering the gap which currently exists. Internal communication as a term is used interchangeably as internal corporate communication (Welch and Jackson, 2007), internal marketing (Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000), internal marketing communication (de Bussy et al. 2003) and staff communication and employee communication (Verčič, Verčič and Sriramesh, 2012).

Scholars have attempted defining internal communication as an integrative approach (Kalla, 2005), as relationship based (Welch and Jackson, 2007), boundary spanning (Cornelissen, 2011), involving consistent distribution of information (Verčič, Verčič and Sriramesh, 2012) and related to planning, alignment and measurement (Dortok, 2006).

For example, Kalla (2005) described it "as integrated internal communication" which brings the practices of business, management, corporate and organizational communication together. In essence it is "all formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels in the organization strategy appropriate for the future of the company, an internal communication plan aligning employees' expectations with the expectations of the company, as well as application, measurement and evaluation." The authorization". The view is that employees receive information from all quarters and therefore having an integrated view is more inclusive.

On the other hand, Welch and Jackson (2007) defines internal communication from a stakeholder perspective - "as the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders within organizations across a number of interrelated dimensions including, internal line manager communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication and internal corporate communication." They place internal communication within the ambit of integrated corporate communication and discuss how relationships shape the function's outcome.

Adding to that, Cornelissen (2011) shared that internal communication 'as the communication which took place with employees within the organization' but argues that social media has changed the approach communicators need to take considering internal and external are no more clearly identified. This is corroborated by Verčič, Verčič, Sriramesh (2012) who explain that internal communication "is the aspiration (starting from the vision and proceeding to policy and mission statement and eventually to strategy) of achieving a systematic analysis and distribution of information at all strata simultaneously coordinated in the most efficient way possible." They state how the boundaries of internal communication need to be revisited since the definition isn't clear.

In a study internal communication and corporate reputation (Dortok, 2006) defines internal communication as "a cycle consisting of a communication strategy appropriate for the future of the company, and internal communication plan aligning employees' expectations with the expectations of the company, as well as application, measurement and evaluation". The author feels that internal communication has a strategic linkage with business results and corporate reputation has an impact on employee and vice versa.

To sum up, internal communication is considered to be two-way inclusive, and it involves all stakeholders, cyclic, future oriented, measurable and impacting corporate reputation.

Theoretical Background

Internal communication can be understood from the context of the institutional theory of organizational communication. The theory argues that individuals as members are associated due to prestige and status and have boundary spanning interests that influence how organizations are perceived. (Cornelissen, 2011; Lammers and Barbour, 2006). The theory offers a holistic approach to understand the role of employees within the realm of organizations. Institutions as defined as ‘constellations of established practices guided by formalized, rational beliefs that transcend particular organizations and situations’ are known to be fixed, enduring and established in nature.

Communication hinges institutions – through individuals who follow established practices. Communication aligns organizing with institutions – individuals who join institutions replicate the rules in communication through repeated practices. Individuals play a role in moving their organizations towards institutions and managers are capable of hinging their organization in boundary spanning inter-organizational communication. It also enhances decision making and influences change opportunities. Boundary spanning communication is dependent on institutions – individuals are directly responsible for communicating with stakeholders outside – be it individuals who belong to public relations, crisis communicators or negotiators. To be efficient in boundary spanning communication the institution needs to be organized well.

In a similar vein, organization identification is about a perception of bonding and togetherness with the organization where the individual is a member. External prestige of the organization influences identification.

When personal values blend with the organization’s values they are more committed. Internal communication has an impact on organizational identification. When downward communication is consistent and reliable employees are more aligned. Employees need to feel that they have control over their work life and decisions related to it - they identify even more. Internal communication works best to influence employee commitment and org

identification when there is a two-way flow (Cornelissen, 2011).

Internal Communication: Dimensions and Value

Internal communication can be classified into two broad themes basis the use of communication technologies - management communication and corporate information and communication systems (CICS). Management communication is about the communication between the manager and the employees mostly related to specific tasks that can influence morale and belongingness. It is mostly interpersonal communication. Management communication is about interpersonal relationships while the latter is about generic information sharing. They both work in union for downward and upward communication. Upward communication encourages employees to raise concerns while the CICS allows platforms to increase the reach and connection to senior leadership. (Cornelissen, 2011).

High performing companies communicate effectively and are known to excel in the following 8 areas.

- educates employees about org culture and values
- helps connect employees to business
- aligns employees’ actions with customer needs
- provides financial information and objectives
- explains and promotes new programs and policies
- integrates new employees into organization
- shares info on value of total rewards program
- demonstrates leadership during change (Yates, 2006).

The more information is shared the more motivated staff is expected to be (Argenti, 1998) and communicating with employees even when it doesn’t directly relate to their job performance is welcomed (White, Vanc and Stafford, 2010). As the employee progresses in an organization from being selfish and focused on the job to being more aware of those around the job it helps to be well informed (Argenti, 1998). Dolphin (2005) argues that trust and reliable information are crucial to developing relationships – increasingly important than merely cascading communication. Internal communication seemed to influence levels of employee’s communication satisfaction in terms of the impact of relationships and trust among between leaders and staff and linking the importance of helping employees know their role and that of their organization. Internal communication can

help employees relate to identification, commitment and loyalty by focusing on brand promise (Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2012).

Face to face, video conferencing, e-mail and enterprise software are among key modes of effective communication and controlled by the communication department. There is a need to allow for upward and downward communication. Downward communication is about communicating what is important (mission) and what is valued (policies). Employees need to be able to communicate upwards - with their ideas, how they perceive their work environment or provide feedback on plans and ideas that managers have on improving the organization's profitability and performance (Cornelissen, 2011).

In a study on the influence of new media and communication on employees De Bussy et al. (2003) reviewed ethical work climate, mutual trust, attitude to innovation and goal alignment as the dimensions of internal marketing communication.

White et al. (2010) studied internal communication in relation to interpersonal influence and discussed information, direction, channel and culture as variables that can improve trust and relationships internally. Adequate information can support employees' understanding of organizational messages, quality of downward communication impacts relationships between management and employees, message efficacy optimizes employees' perceptions of communication channels and culture influences communication.

Role and Objectives of Internal Communication

The role of internal communication is understood as wide ranging and relevant for business success. Internal communication is believed to be a key intangible factor driving organisational performance. Considered a competitive advantage and that which differentiates high performing organizations from the rest effective internal communication is known to command a market premium, bring higher shareholder value, reduce employee turnover and increase employee engagement. Higher performing organizations in the public and private sector organizations were more likely to use certain collective and individual mechanisms of internal communications. (Yates, 2006, Work Foundation, 2007). Senior managers have a role to play. Without sufficient upward communication managers

may not get the complete picture of their problems thereby limiting their ability to find suitable solutions (Robson and Tourish 2005).

Although internal communication is growing practitioners are divided about its functioning and how it relates within a multidisciplinary perspective. It is known to be interdisciplinary and seen as a separate domain since it has different skills and knowledge areas. However, there isn't consensus on where it needs to be housed and managed - within HR or corporate communication or as a separate department (Verčič, Verčič, Sriramesh, 2012). Most organizations had one or two dedicated staff manning internal communication (The Work Foundation, 2007).

The role is seen as technical in nature - distributing information and overseeing the creation of internal media content and in aligning the goals of the employees to that of the organization they work for. The internal communicator is known as an 'information manager,' 'coach,' and 'mediator' and the objectives include motivating, aligning employees thereby creating value and building culture (Verčič, Verčič, Sriramesh, 2012). Internal communication is also challenging and complex (Chalmers, 2008) although viewing it as a strategic approach leads to improved results (The Work Foundation, 2007).

ROI for internal communication considers financial and non-financial measures. Organizations which measure effective usage of resources have a competitive advantage. There is no one best size fits all measure. A comprehensive internal set-up is needed to ensure all communication activities are interlinked and measured right. Need to monitor ROI at different times of the communication process and journey, timing matters while calculating ROI. Use alternate measures to address ROI when direct measures are tough to arrive at (Meng and Berger, 2012).

Employee communication is seen on par with external communication since it is known to be as sophisticated. The newsletter is seen as an opportunity to create an image of the firm, linked to communication strategy and aligned with both internal and external messages. Informal discussions are the best approach to have with employees. Respect and listening are two important factors. Allow employees to be the first to know. Managers are the most important factor in internal communication decision making, involvement key. (Argenti, 1998).

Most organizations have internal communication as part of the communication department (Dolphin, 2005). In a UK based study approximately half of the organizations had internal communication located within one centralized department, and half of the teams were split across departments although in large organizations with over 5000 employees it sat within corporate communications (The Work Foundation, 2007).

Internal Communication Resources

Most internal communication managed within the budgets available rather than objectives set. Budgets have seen an increase establishing the importance of this function (Work Foundation, 2007). Communication leaders in the UK were aware of the importance of internal communication and strategic value it brings. The role of the communicator is to create more opportunities for employees to be engaged, listen, speak up and be involved. Management needs to give equal importance to internal communication in relation to external communication. Change management initiatives are successful with clear and consistent internal communication.

Internal communications is related to a “corporate lifeboat.” Most organizations invest internal communication with the communications department instead of the personnel team. The more the internal and external messages aligned the better the chances of the organization speaking in a unified voice. Internal communication wasn’t adequately represented at the board level. The organizational size and the resources were factors that determine the approaches taken for internal communication. Robust relationships, greater trust and valued information are the outcomes of effective internal communication. The communication leaders can be ‘today’s strategic information manager.’ The state of internal communication is good in the UK and growing steadily. (Dolphin, 2005).

Internal Branding

Employees are understood to be ‘ambassadors of commitment’ and internal communication can improve their affinity to support the brand (Argenti, 1998). Need for establishing communication standards in a company and to have consistent communication programs. Visual representation of the brand along with logos and other

symbols helped to connect employees to the brand. Internal corporate communication messages need to focus more on providing strategic direction and position brand messages better. Face to face communication worked well with the opportunities to interact directly and express opinions.

Feedback and actions thereafter seems undervalued and neglected. Brand training can influence identification with the brand values and needs to be conducted regularly. Internal communication seemed to influence levels of employee’s communication satisfaction - a) the impact of relationships and trust among between leaders and staff and b) the importance of helping employees know their role and that of their organization. Internal communication can help employees relate to identification, commitment and loyalty by focusing on brand promise. Senior management participation for brand building needed more work. Recommendation that HR and ICC must be integrated to be most effective (Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2012).

Organizational Culture

Evidence from a Delphi study conducted in Europe indicates that internal communication is cross-national and cross-cultural and there is a need to discuss this subject further. (Verčič, Verčič, Sriramesh, 2012).

Internal communication is seen as addressing a uni-audience since it takes place in a communication climate influenced by corporate culture it has an impact on it (Welch and Jackson, 2007). Poor internal communication can be detrimental to organizational effectiveness and internal relationships if employees don’t receive information in formats that are useful or acceptable to them (Welch, 2012) Although corporate culture and the nature of internal communication are known to improve corporate efficiency implementing internal communication is difficult since it can result in fissures, breaks and complexity in organizational culture, especially in bureaucratic organizations (Stern, Stern and Rooyen, 2001).

Yates (2006) in her study on communication effectiveness and internal communication discovered that educating employees about organizational culture and values has a positive impact on their commitment.

However, there are gaps even among high communication effectiveness companies. Less than a third of high effective

firms provide employees opportunity to give inputs on decisions and 25% seek inputs on how the business is run. To improve communication effectiveness organizations need to create documented communication strategies, conduct yearly plans, establish two way communication channels, provide managers with better tools and training, tap technologies, add formal measurement metrics and form global advisory group to identify specific focus, customize and get buy-in to create a climate that fosters trust and feedback.

Practitioners' Competencies and Internal Communication

There are calls to focus on research that understands the implications of culture and organizational boundaries in relation to internal communication (Verčič, Verčič, Sriramesh, 2012). The role of internal communication is varied, multifaceted and expects the professional to demonstrate larger number of competencies. A study by Chalmers (2008) reviewed job advertisements for internal communication and concluded that internal communication is known to have contributed to the success to the organizations in terms of tactics and strategies. The most frequently mentioned personal attributes were self-motivation and creativity. Also the ability to work with senior leadership, handle complexity and ambiguity, balancing multiple projects, working in an integrated manner and having a focus on business results.

With the advent of new technologies, messages to employees don't always remain inside the organization. Employees can distribute their own messages about an organization electronically to outside stakeholders often without much control or expectation from the employer (Cornelissen, 2011). Co-relation between corporate reputation and internal communication, those organizations which feature in the top must have a more evolved approach to internal communication thereby impacting corporate reputation. Companies with higher reputations give more importance to internal communication, had more robust internal communication plans, focused on measurement, impacted business objectives, invested in internal communication teams, used effective tools for sharing business objectives. Annual meetings and sharing information about the business plan, strategy and future were important, consensus on meeting both financial and non-financial outcomes/results (Dortok, 2006).

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the role, value and impact of internal communication from the practitioners' viewpoint. The methodology considered appropriate for this study was a qualitative survey through online interviews served via e-mail, hosted on the author's blog and posted on specific forums on professional networking sites such as LinkedIn.

This paper critically and qualitatively reviews the landscape of internal communication as perceived by internal communication practitioners in the Asia Pacific region, India included.

The author tried to ascertain how:

- do internal communication professionals perceive internal communication and its role within the organization?
- Is internal communication supported and fits within the organizational framework through budgets and resources?
- Is internal communication related to internal branding and culture?
- Are internal communication practitioner's perceived skills, knowledge and attributes needed to be successful?
- Do internal communication professionals identify priorities and understand the focus on the future?

Due to the researcher's background as an internal communicator, panelist on communication award juries, communication workshop trainer and committee member of global and local communication bodies, access to people and information not in the public domain was easier to get.

Methodology

For this qualitative study the researcher approached practitioners directly and via online forums and received 15 responses. Data was gathered through an online survey using a convenience sampling method and analyzed to identify themes and patterns. Since internal communication as a function is nascent the researcher approached corporate communication practitioners directly on social media and communication forums. The survey was run in October 2014 with a focus on the state of internal communication in the Asia Pacific region including India. The survey link was

publically hosted on the author's blog and also posted on social media sites for wider coverage and awareness.

The survey was semi-structured and designed to obtain the perspectives of internal communication practitioners at all levels in their organization. Given the theoretical context of internal communications the author developed an interview questionnaire based on literature which included closed and

open ended questions. The latter provided opportunities to analyze free text content and draw inferences about the perception of the function from practitioners. The themes discussed included the team and mandate, the budget and spend, internal branding, organizational culture, knowledge, skills and attributes of internal communicators, priorities and opportunities as understood by the practitioner and views on the future of internal communication.

Table 1 covers the interviewee information.

Category	Description
Industry	Multiple sectors
Number of interviews	15
Educational qualification of interviewees	Graduate, post graduate
Management level	Mid to senior level
Geographical location of interviewees	India, Australia

The survey was in English and the author collected responses over a 3 week period. Data from the survey were collated and analyzed thereafter to identify themes and patterns following the technique used by qualitative researchers (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). A high level summary report was promised to all respondents and was shared directly via e-mail individually.

Individual names of participants and companies were kept anonymous and confidential and therefore the interviewees aren't identified by name in this paper. Information on respondents' name, educational qualification, background and role, organization name, approximate number of employees in the organization, industry, overall years of experience, years of internal communication experience and contact e-mail were sought.

Results and conclusions

The internal communication function is viewed as important in most organizations. A majority of the organizations had team size of 5 members and were mostly housed within Corporate Communications and Marketing functions. This is consistent with research which indicates that most internal communication teams sit within the communication department (Dolphin, 2005).

The internal communication team is called on to deliver on employee engagement and leadership communication. Managing channels and events came in next among the stated responsibilities. Only half the respondents believed their team met the needs of their respective organization and a significant number agreed that the organization in turn invested in building and growing the team.

A majority (over 80%) of communicators claimed they had a strategy in place for internal communication and a majority agreed that the function was viewed as important to the organization's success. On the areas within internal communication that needed attention most communicators felt the following were important: building a climate for communication, collaborating across teams, instilling a sense of pride, integrating the organization, reducing information overload, inspiring employees to contribute to communication and having a dialogue. This is in line with Dortok (2006) who discovered that internal communication has a strategic role in encouraging employees to value add to the organization's reputation - taking the company ahead. Employees can elevate the organization's reputation and the business outcomes, directly or indirectly. Investing in internal communication is beneficial for corporate reputation.

The biggest barriers to delivering effective internal communication were the inability to demonstrate value of the function, low budgets, limited line of sight, poor alignment of employees, lack of commitment from senior leaders, competing priorities and lack of time.

The focus on branding employees is considering an important responsibility of the function. What defines internal branding is hazy. A few respondents noted:

- It is a marathon and not a sprint,
- Conserving brand ideals and standing by it,
- The employee as the best brand ambassador and a key driver of organizational reputation,
- Building, sustaining and improving the brand, products, services and values of the company,,
- The way we play,
- A way to build company culture.

It is evident that without a common understanding of what internal branding is and can deliver most communicators will struggle to provide tangible value to stakeholders. Just over half the communicators felt they were directly responsible for internal branding although a sizable number mentioned that their organization has plans to invest in building brand ambassadors from within. The most attention for internal branding initiatives were received by leadership connections, social media engagements while a high number of respondents agreed that their organization had a unified approach to branding – internal and external.

To improve internal branding, the following suggestions emerged as key themes:

- a) surveying audiences
- b) addressing the 'what's in it for me' for employees
- c) being aware of language used to create pride among the workforce
- d) having a joined up approach with HR and Marketing
- e) need for consistency in messaging
- f) adopting digital channels
- g) Improving cross business learning and sharing of knowledge
- h) helping managers and employees to be advocates

Only about half the respondents felt that their organization had a unique culture although a majority (85%) felt that communication played a critical role in shaping culture. Most organizations surveyed their employees on culture annually while a large number of communicators claimed their employees viewed values as central to their work. Sharing stories and having leaders articulate values were among the top two approaches adopted to communicate culture although a low percentage completely agreed that employees knew the organization's culture. Just over half the respondents communicated the culture and values within their organizations. To influence organization culture a few recommendations for internal communication were:

- a) Tap the power of employees as brand ambassadors
- b) Use storytelling to communicate messages
- c) Walk the talk
- d) Seek feedback and integrate inputs in everyday communication
- e) Recognize ideas and rewarding 'heroes'
- f) Build a sense of shared purpose
- g) Consistently drive messages

In terms of skills influencing and stakeholder management were called out as key drivers for improving performance while knowing the organization, employees and strategy helped the internal communicator succeed. Passion for the job, patience and focus were key attributes for an internal communicator to make progress at work.

The barriers preventing internal communicators from making progress were limited business perspective, lack of leadership support, inability to demonstrate value and impact and low credibility of the function. The on-the-job training, mentoring and accreditation were called out as the best approaches to enhance learning while only a few mentioned they had a dedicated budget for training. The top priorities for the team were employee engagement, improving reach and impact and raising the potential of internal channels.

Respondents felt the function needs to focus more on engaging employees, increasing scope and reach, measurement, conducting shorter and more frequent surveys, evolving channels, creating assets for scale, training the team.

While most communicators exuded confidence about achieving their priorities only about half accepted they had achieved their goals from the previous year. Words used to describe the function included “committed, interested, involved” e-mail overloaders' 'passionate and go getters', 'responsiveness, fast and impactful.’

Practitioners have an optimistic view of the future. They felt opportunities ahead are in mobile engagement, CSR, measurement, social media, analytics and video. This is in line with the advances in technology and the need for internal communication practitioners to be skilled in this emerging domain (Chalmers, 2008). However, challenges include lack of cohesive initiatives, need for tailor made solutions, need to convince leadership. Employee engagement, technology changes “Hope to see internal communications involved with strategic decision making” and “need more following to convince senior leadership.”

To improve internal communication respondents suggest better planning, clearer division of work, curiosity to learn and stay ahead of industry changes, taking pride in the work, using storytelling as an approach, connecting with peers in the industry and taking on larger responsibilities at work. These recommendations corroborate views by Argenti (1998) who recommended that employees must be the first to know, and managers are crucial in internal communication decision making. Respect and listening are two important factors while considering employee communication.

Overall, the sentiments are positive about how internal communication is perceived among practitioners. There is increased understanding of the role of the function and the value it can add. There is however greater expectation on the support internal communicators need from leaders. Many factors were cited as barriers that reduce the impact of the domain.

Practical and social implications

There has been limited research on internal communication and this adds to the body of knowledge providing inputs for practitioners to blend theory with practice. The results indicate that there is limited understanding and appreciation of the role of internal communication on internal branding and culture.

From the results it is evident that there is a need to bring rigor to the practice by institutionalizing best practices and standards apart from creating a platform for learning and development. In that sense, the region is gaining maturity and provides opportunities for practitioners to establish their credentials formally.

This study attempts to fill a gap that exists in internal communication literature on the role, focus, support and future of the function in the region. However, it is limited to the Asia Pacific region with a bias towards India since a majority of the responses were from the country. Understanding how practitioners in other geographies, review the linkages between internal communication, culture, internal branding and competencies will add further depth to the body of knowledge. There is a need to conduct further empirical studies to gauge the value and impact of internal communication from a practitioner's viewpoint.

Note:

The survey report is published at:

<https://intraskope.wordpress.com/2015/04/05/announcing-the-2014-apac-and-india-internal-communications-survey-results/>

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